

A movie poster featuring a woman in a red Victorian-style dress standing in front of a large, two-story house at night. The woman has dark hair and is looking over her shoulder. The house has a dark roof and white trim. The scene is lit with soft, warm light, and there are small, glowing particles in the air.

LEAH CONOLLY

A MYSTERY
TO BIND THEIR
HEARTS

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Thank you so much for your support as we embark on a journey through Regency England together.

If you're not a member of my family yet, it's never too late! Stay up to date on upcoming releases and check out my website for exclusive gifts, romance suggestions, and lots of surprises!

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About Leah Conolly

Leah, or Leou as her friends call her is a South Dakota native. She describes herself as an affordable psychiatrist since she started reading books out of curiosity for the deeper exploration of the subconscious.

She later studied psychology and criminology in NY, but she returned to her hometown when the family business was at risk of closing.

Ten years later, she writes books to capture the feelings of every major life event she encountered so far. Thankfully, her romantic nature considers everything to be important resulting in immense writing

activity! In her spare time, she provides online counseling for free to women in need. She considers her marriage to be a great adventure and as her husband recalls “every time we argue she comes back later with a new book based on our disagreements set in a different century!”

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A Mystery to Bind their Hearts

Prologue

A Priori

The night was still. A storm rumbled on the horizon, but our young heroine thought herself quite safe. After all, she was safe here in the countryside, away from the bustle of the city. What danger could the storm bring?

Excerpt from *Death in a Storm* (1818) by T.

Oakley, p. 1.

Thunder crashed outside the window, and Miss Tabitha Oakley huddled closer under her blanket as she pored over her book in the

candlelight. It was long past the time where she should be asleep—and yet how could she sleep now, when she was so close to at last discovering the truth?

She traced the words with her right index finger while her left hand was busy tucking strands of her black curls behind her ear. She wasn't aware that she did so—it was an unconscious nervous habit of hers—but if she did know, she wouldn't be upset. It was a quirk she shared with Julian Hawthorne, the young fictional detective who solved crimes

that others missed. Her lips moved silently along with the words as she read, spellbound by the action.

“What do you say, Hawthorne? Another round?” the villainous Hendricks asked, his fists raised and bloodied. Hawthorne knew that he must give Arianne time to escape, but if he went another round with Hendricks and lost, it would all have been for nothing.

Hawthorne had come to the idyllic countryside town for one reason—to prevent a

*murder—and he had failed. Now, in the name of
his late mother and father and poor deceased
Lady Martin, he would find the killer.*

*Little did he know that a pair of eyes
watched from the shadows. Hawthorne didn't
hear as—*

“Tabby?”

Tabitha shrieked and fell backward onto
her bed in a most undistinguished manner, her
book flopping to the floor. It took her a few

seconds to reorient herself before she saw her mother standing there in the doorway, her face ominously highlighted by the candlelight.

“Goodness, Tabitha, were you reading those horrid books again?” Mrs. Oakley demanded with a sniff. “You’ll fill your head with monsters.”

Outside, the rain pattered down so heavily that Tabitha was surprised that the window didn’t break. Despite this, and despite the fact that it was almost three in the

morning, she could still hear carriages and horses outside.

It's no surprise. London never sleeps.

She wondered what it must be like to be out there. What adventures were happening right under her nose every night? What illicit deals were happening on the corner of her street, how many wily urchins skulked in the alleys near her home?

And yet, despite spending twenty years in

London, Tabitha had never had anything exciting happen to her in her entire life. It felt dreadful to admit, but her life was plain boring. It hadn't been so bad when Laura was around. Her elder sister was a good friend and companion. But after Laura married and moved to the countryside, leaving Tabitha here alone with her parents, life became so stale as to be almost unbearable.

“Tabby, dear, are you listening to me?”

her mother asked.

Tabitha forced a smile onto her face.

“Yes, Mother,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

“Girls who do not sleep end up with horrible dark marks under their eyes, you know,” Mrs. Oakley clucked. “How will you ever fetch a husband next season if you walk around looking like some waif seduced by a vampire?”

“At least fighting a vampire would make my life a little more interesting,” Tabitha muttered under her breath.

“What was that, dear?”

“I said, ‘What are you doing awake at such an hour anyway, Mother’?” Tabitha said more loudly.

Mrs. Oakley frowned, but continued, “the rain kept me awake, dear. And I just remembered that I forgot to mention the letter.”

“What letter would that be?” Tabitha

asked, her full attention on her mother at last.

A letter! Something from the outside world!

Isn't it ironic that I live directly in the middle of the city and yet I feel more alone than the furthest country bumpkin! Where is the adventure in my life? The love and romance? The excitement?

“From your sister,” Mrs. Oakley replied, holding it out. “I don’t understand why you cannot simply write to one another in English.”

“Because you keep trying to read our letters,” Tabitha said absently, unfolding the letter with eager fingers. It had been a while since she heard from Laura.

The sisters did not write their letters in English, nor French, nor Latin or Greek. Instead, when they were very young, the two of them had created a cipher of sorts. They wrote in this secret language, understood by nobody except each other.

My dear sister, the letter started.

I have found myself in something of an awkward situation. The countryside is remarkably quiet, which was pleasant for holidays in our youth, but which is quite jarring to realize is my new normal. I feel a little lost in all of this empty space.

As for Mr. Roberts, he is still exceedingly pleasant. However, an awkwardness has grown between us, as I believe it has occurred to us both that we do not yet know each other very well at

all!

I do hate to put you out, my darling Tabby, but what would you say to a small visit? Your company would be truly invaluable to me as I adjust to my new life, and it would be a wonderful way for you to finally get to know Daniel.

Do write soon. I miss you, and it is my fondest wish to host you in my home. Pass my love onto Mother and Father, and do tell Mother to stop trying to read our letters.

Yours in gleeful anticipation,

Your beloved sister,

Mrs. Laura Roberts

Tabitha lowered the letter, feeling herself fill with excitement. This was it—the chance she had been waiting for. All right, perhaps a holiday to the country and a visit to her sister weren't exactly the beginning of a great adventure novel, but it would be something

different at last. She'd finally get to know her brother-in-law, and maybe outside of the Town she'd even be able to work on her own novel.

“Mother,” she said. “I’m going on a trip.”

Outside, thunder rumbled on the horizon.

Chapter 1

Ab Initio

Though our young hero thought himself quite the detective, he was simply a hardworking earnest man trying to get by the best he could. Indeed, he could never have known beforehand what a horrid scenario waited just around the corner.

Excerpt from *Death in a Storm* (1818) by T.

Oakley, p. 15.

Hatcher and Barton, Financial Solicitors, were not quite as united as their company's name might imply. The firm had been started

decades before by Mr. Gregory Barton and his previous partner, Mr. Paul Hatcher, now deceased. Mr. Hatcher's share of the business had passed to his son, Reginald, who was now trying his best to keep the place going in his father's memory.

The problem for Reginald, however, was not shouldering the massive amount of work that had built up while his father was sick and dying. No, the problem for this young man of eight and twenty was that he *also* had to take on Mr. Barton's work.

Reginald stood with his closest friend, Daniel Roberts, who was here trying to help him dig himself and the business out of its current precarious situation. Reginald knew that the problem was Barton. He suspected that the man had been cheating his family for years, and he wanted him out.

Though my father, rest his soul, was too trusting. I must be careful if I am to pull Barton away from his half of the partnership.

He couldn't afford such a thing alone, he knew, but perhaps with Daniel's help . . .

“By all accounts, this doesn't make sense,” Daniel said as he looked over a pile of paper once again. “You're missing several hundred pounds over the past year. You think that Barton has been skimming?”

“Skimming?” Reginald asked, smiling a faint ironic smile. “Have you seen the amount? He hasn't skimmed; he's scooped. I just don't have the evidence to present him. If I did, we

could get him to leave the company and sell his share, but until then it seems I am stuck with being robbed.”

“Bah,” Daniel grumbled. “Barton and Grisham both are monsters. It’s no wonder the two are such good friends. Both of their families have been trying to cheat mine since my great-grandfather’s day over that land, and now Barton has a grip on you as well.”

“I know, Danny. And you know I’m trying to do something about it,” Reginald told

him. “I just don’t know what. Where Barton is, Grisham will be, and we can’t replace Barton until we get our finances in order. It’s an endless cycle, I know, but we don’t have many options.”

“We could always kill him,” Daniel said with a straight face. “And pin it on Grisham. It will get them both out of my hair.”

There was a pause, and then Reginald snorted. His friend’s strange, dark sense of humor was going to get them both into trouble

one of these days. "Let's leave that for a last resort, shall we?" he replied dryly.

Both men were about to turn back to the papers when the front door bell rang. They hurried out into the front of the building only to see the door close again as Daniel's new wife entered. Reginald glanced at his friend and tried to hide his amusement at the clear nervousness on Daniel's face.

"Mrs. Roberts. How unexpected, and welcome," Reginald greeted when it became

obvious that neither of them was about to speak. “What brings you here?”

“I . . . I came to see Mr. Roberts,” the young woman said hesitantly. “I received a letter from my sister today, you see, and—”

“Would you like to go to the back room for some privacy?” Reginald offered.

“No!” both Daniel and Mrs. Roberts said sharply.

Reginald struggled to keep a straight face, waiting.

“No,” Mrs. Roberts said again. “That’s quite all right. I simply wanted to inform my husband that an invitation arrived today from Mr. Barton. It seems that he will be throwing a large party over the course of next week to celebrate his latest endeavor with Mr. Grisham.”

Daniel rolled his eyes, and Reginald sighed. He supposed an invitation would be

waiting for him when he returned home, as well. He could hardly refuse to go, but the timing was awful. He hated Grisham, and the last thing he wanted to do was spend more time with Mr. Barton.

That said, perhaps I will be able to take the chance to convince him to retire. He is almost in his fiftieth year now . . .

“You may accept the invitation, Laura,” Daniel said, though he sounded as if he had a terrible taste on his tongue as he spoke. “We’ll

be there, I suppose. Your sister will have to come as well—I imagine she'll hate me after, but there's not much we can do about it."

"Your sister is coming to visit?" Reginald asked. He vaguely remembered the younger sister from Daniel's wedding. Both sisters looked very similar—petite and slim with large blue eyes—but where the older sister's hair was a chocolate brown, he remembered the younger had hair like ink, so black that it seemed to glow with iridescent color in the right light.

I remember thinking that she was beautiful.

I never got a chance to speak with her, though.

“Oh, yes,” Mrs. Roberts replied. “Miss Oakley—Tabitha is her name—was already scheduled for a visit to keep me company. I’m sure that she won’t mind accompanying us to the event. She’s much livelier than I am, you see. She’s a fun person to be around.”

“I find you plenty fun to be around, Laura,” Daniel said. Mrs. Roberts looked at her

husband and blushed a deep pink, and
Daniel's face also changed color.

Reginald deliberately didn't say a word.
It was clear to him that, in the speed of their
marriage, the two had forgotten to get to
know each other. Now they treated each other
as though they wore silk gloves, like two
children with their first fancy, terrified to say
the wrong thing.

The staring went on a little too long, so
Reginald eventually cleared his throat. "So,

tell me about your sister,” he said. “Since we are all soon to be spending so much time together.”

Relieved by the change of subject, Mrs. Roberts smiled at him. “Oh, well, when you meet her, you *must* call me Laura. She will tease me terribly if she hears you calling me missus anything. She has this terrible habit of referring to *everyone* by first name, you know. Sometimes I think she’s unaware of social structure at all.”

Reginald laughed. Some men may have been offended by such a concept, but he found it intriguing. “As you say, Mrs. Roberts. I mean, Laura. Your sister is not yet out in society? She must be twenty by now, though?”

Laura smiled faintly. “She is. She’s just so lost in her world of mystery and intrigue that I wonder if she’s aware of it.”

“Miss Tabitha reads and writes mystery novels, you see,” Daniel added. As Reginald watched, Laura looked at her husband with

her lips slightly parted, cheeks flushed, and eyes glowing.

It seems to me she is pleased that you know such things. Keep going and you'll both be fine.

“That’s rather unusual for a young woman, is it not?” Reginald asked. “Especially the writing. I heard that Percy Bysshe Shelley’s wife released a novel this year, though I haven’t had a chance to read it.”

“Frankenstein, yes,” Laura replied. “If you

wish for a conversation topic to hold with Tabitha, then I strongly suggest you find a copy before the party. Mrs. Shelley is a heroine of hers, you know. It is a shame that she published it anonymously. Hopefully, one day she will reveal her name as the creator of the novel.”

“I shall make a point of it. Thank you for the advice,” Reginald said with a nod.

“My wife and her sister are very close,” Daniel said abruptly. Both of them turned to

face him, and he looked a little embarrassed.

Reginald was suddenly forcefully reminded of a time in his boyhood when Daniel had rattled off the kingdom, order, and class of several animals just to prove that he knew them.

“We are,” Laura confirmed. “Though quite different. I can’t imagine from where she got her imagination if I am perfectly honest. My gentleman father and my beloved mother are of course wonderful people, but neither of them is quite so . . . inventive.”

“You’re plenty clever though, Laura,”

Daniel said.

“I . . . thank you,” Laura replied.

Reginald cleared his throat. “Daniel, why don’t you and Laura head off home?” he said.

“It seems you have a trip to prepare for. I can finish up here and I know where to find you if I should need to.”

Daniel shot him a grateful look and nodded. “Well, if you’re sure, Reg,” he said.

He held out his arm to his wife, who blushed but took it. “Shall we?”

“We shall. A pleasure to see you as always, Mr. Hatcher,” Laura said.

“If you are to be Laura, then I must be Reginald,” he replied. She blushed again—she did that so easily, he’d noticed—and smiled faintly before she and her husband left.

Reginald stood alone in his office and took a deep breath. A party at Barton’s

countryside manor sounded dreadful . . . but
who knew? It could be exactly the opportunity
he was looking for.

And, he had to admit, he was more than
a little intrigued by Laura's description of her
sister.

"Frankenstein," he muttered to himself. "I
wonder . . ."

Tabitha always found the quaintness of the English countryside a bit of a shock to the system. She had been born and raised in the Town, and she associated the green fields and fresh air with family trips, not with places that people actually *lived*. And yet here she was now, pulling up to a renovated stone building which looked as much part of the landscape as the trees nearby.

Laura must be so dreadfully bored. She was always going to events and meeting with her friends.

Still, as the driver helped her with her bags, Tabitha had to admit that the place was pretty. Yes, she'd be able to get quite a bit of writing done here. Her thoughts were interrupted by an excited squeal, and she looked up to see Laura running toward her.

Laughing, the two sisters embraced, happily sobbing as if it had been years rather than a couple of months since they last laid eyes on each other.

Laura and Tabitha had always been close. There were three years between them—Laura was the elder one at three and twenty—but they might as well have been twins. They looked the same except for a difference in their hair color and a more angular slant to Tabitha's features, and though their personalities differed, they complemented one another as if they were two halves of one whole.

Nobody had been more surprised than Tabitha when Laura married Daniel Roberts

by special license only two weeks after meeting him at the second ball of the season. Laura had apologized over and over, at the time so overwhelmed with her infatuation that she simply could not wait. It had been three or four months since then, and though Laura had visited the city once to formally introduce her husband to their parents, this would be the first time that Tabitha would meet him more than in passing.

“Laura, darling, how are you?” Tabitha asked, affectionately tucking a strand of

Laura's hair back. "Marriage suits you."

"Oh, stop," Laura replied, waving a dismissive hand. She hesitated. "Truth be told, Tabby, Daniel and I, we—"

The driver cleared his throat. "Will that be all, Miss Oakley?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, thank you," Tabitha said, pulling back from her sister to smile at the man. "Your help is greatly appreciated. Here, for your trouble."

The driver seemed surprised. “Mr. Oakley already paid me in full,” he said. “There’s no need—”

“I insist,” Tabitha said, brandishing the little bag. “It’s only a few shillings, please. You were ever so pleasant.”

The driver’s face brightened. “Well, thank you kindly,” he replied, accepting the tip. He hesitated before slipping it into his pocket then doffed his hat at both Tabitha and

Laura before climbing back into his buggy and heading away.

When they were alone, Laura said, “Oh, you must be freezing. Come, I’ll have the gardener bring in the bags. Let’s talk inside.”

The inside was just as quaint and picturesque as the outside. The floors were hard wood covered in mismatched but clearly well-made rugs and carpets; the walls were dotted with paintings of landscapes, and the furniture in the sitting room where Laura led

Tabitha seemed to have been chosen based on texture rather than any sense of visual style.

“My goodness,” Tabitha said. “How . . . eclectic.”

Laura smiled as they sat. “Daniel is known as quite the eccentric. He and his friend Reginald find it quite diverting to select the most ostentatious pieces of furniture and shock guests with their mismatched décor.”

Tabitha chuckled. “They both sound

delightful.” The sisters sat together on one of the sofas, and then Tabitha took Laura’s hand. “So why do you look so sad?”

“I’m not sad,” Laura insisted immediately. There was a pause, and then she sighed. “I just . . . recently, I’ve come to realize I don’t *know* Daniel very well. When we met and when we married it seemed as if we would never run out of things to talk about. Now, though, there’s some . . . awkwardness. I don’t understand what caused it. I—”

Before she could continue, the door opened and a young man entered. He was quite short for a man—actually a few inches below Tabitha and Laura—but he had a presence about him that made it hard to see him as anything other than an imposing gentleman. His hair was bright red, his eyes bright green, and Tabitha had to admit she could see how her sister had become so charmed with Daniel Roberts at first sight.

“Ah, Laura, forgive me. I didn’t realize . .

.” Daniel said awkwardly. “I mean, that is to say, I . . . well, I, er . . .”

Laura blushed a pretty pink color. “Erm. Daniel, you remember my sister, Miss Tabitha Oakley.”

“Just Tabitha, please,” she said immediately. She stood and held out her hand to shake.

Daniel raised an eyebrow at the slightly masculine gesture, but shook her hand

anyway. “A pleasure seeing you again, Tabitha,” he said. “It’s good to have the time to properly meet you at last. And you may call me Daniel, of course.”

Tabitha smiled and thanked him. As husband and wife conversed, she sank back into her observations, watching the awkward way they moved around each other. People watching had always been a hobby of hers—it was one of the things that spurred her on most as a writer. In this case, Laura and Daniel were talking about some party, both so hesitant and

apologetic that Tabitha would have barely guessed they *knew* each other, much less were married.

How silly! They are clearly enamored, and yet they are both so terrified of saying the wrong thing!

“ . . . tomorrow evening,” Daniel finished. “I hope that’s all right with both you and your fine sister, but I don’t want to keep Barton waiting. You know that I will never hear the end of it if I do.”

“Oh dear,” Laura replied. “I was hoping we would have a chance to show Tabby around the village a little more. She only just got here, and now we’re to make her travel again?”

There was a stiff pause, and Tabitha knew that she had to say something. “I do not mind at all,” she commented quickly. “After all, the more I see, the more I have to write about! Mr. Barton is the gentleman who is hosting the party?”

“I am not sure *gentleman* is a word I would apply to Gregory Barton,” Daniel replied, his lip curled in distaste. “But yes, he is hosting. We shan’t be at his home, however; he’s hosting it at the Grishams’.”

“Isn’t that a little odd?” Tabitha asked.
“How does everyone know each other?”

“Mr. Grisham and Mr. Barton are old friends. Mr. Barton is Daniel’s friend Reginald’s business partner,” Laura explained.

“They . . . do not get along particularly well.

The Bartons and the Robertses have also had a significant argument over a nearby piece of land for a few generations now.”

“He has no argument,” Daniel said with an annoyed snort. “He’s a cheat and a cad. Regardless, we shall head to Grisham’s manor tomorrow. It was good to meet you, Tabitha.”

He left the room again, clearly in a foul mood.

“Don’t mind him,” Laura said when the door closed. “Barton does this to him. And Grisham—Mr. Basil Grisham, you know, the banker—aggravates him too. To deal with them both at once for a week may be, well, challenging. I am ever so glad that you are here, my darling sister.”

Tabitha nodded. “Well, if nothing else, it sounds as if we are in for a week of intrigue. And you know how much I love intrigue.”

“How *is* your book coming along?” Laura

asked.

Tabitha shrugged. “Worse than I would like it to. I am hoping that my trip here will feed me some inspiration so that I might write the kind of mystery that keeps a person awake at night.”

“In this sleepy town?” Laura asked, laughing. “The most exciting thing to happen in recent years other than my marriage was when Joanna Paddington took a wrong turn on her stroll and ended up halfway to Surrey.”

“Still,” Tabitha replied. “It has to have *something* more exciting than home.”

“Oh, Tabby, you haven’t changed,” Laura said fondly. “But do be careful what you wish for.”

It would only be a few days until they all learned to their horror just how legitimate this advice would really be.

Chapter 2

Dramatis Personae

They were the strangest group of characters that Miss Willoughby had ever seen. There was the stuffy banker and his proud wife, a baron's daughter who thought herself a queen, a shrewd gossip and her hapless husband, a clueless young woman, a blustering host, and, of course . . . him.

Excerpt from *Death in a Storm* (1818) by T.

Oakley, p. 26.

The carriage ride from Laura's home to Grisham's manor was mostly uneventful.

Tabitha's presence seemed to awaken something inside of Laura, and the two sisters spent most of their time chatting and laughing, excitedly speculating about the kind of people who would be at this party. Daniel, on the other hand, was oddly quiet. He was staring out of the window, looking very uncomfortable, and would only respond with brief politeness to anything his wife or sister-in-law tried to say to him.

“I think it's just such a shame,” Tabitha said, trying her best to keep the conversation

afloat. "That there shall be no young men my age at this party. As I imagine you'll be spending time together, I fear I will be terribly bored."

"Young men!" Laura repeated, laughing.

"Good God! Are you old enough for that already? I could have sworn you were still a young girl."

"I could have sworn the same, and yet here we are with your husband," Tabitha replied.

Daniel finally cracked a smile at that, though his expression was still distant.

“Reginald will be at the party,” he said. “You may like him, Tabitha. You and he share a certain . . . wit.”

“He’s a year younger than Daniel is,” Laura added. “And quite handsome, if you like the tall, blond type, which I seem to remember you do.”

“Oh, do stop,” Tabitha replied, chuckling.

“We cannot all be so fortunate as to find true love at the first party we attend. Tell her so, Daniel. Tell her how drastically unlikely it is that I should marry your friend.”

“I don’t know much about love, I’m afraid,” Daniel replied, turning back to the window. “Perhaps you ladies will be better suited to discussing such things.”

Laura’s expression faltered, and Tabitha cursed under her breath. This problem—whatever it was—clearly ran deep. But what

could Tabitha do to help?

Fortunately, just then, the carriage traversed the final hill down into the valley where Grisham's manor was located. Tabitha was surprised to see it—it looked like some German castle straight from her horror stories, not a home for a middle-class Englishman.

“Grisham lives *here*?” she asked, staring through the haze of rain outside at the stone walls and archaic grand windows. “My God!”

“Yes, his great-granduncle or some such nonsense was a European architect and historian. Grisham lives here as a result,” Daniel replied. “I suppose it’s fairly clear why Barton chooses to have his parties here instead of at his own home, but it isn’t half far from everything.”

“I don’t like the look of this rain,” Laura said nervously as they exited the carriage and headed to the front door. “This valley doesn’t look very protected from flooding. If there’s a storm . . .”

“We’ll be all right, Laura,” Daniel said softly, taking her hand. Tabitha raised her eyebrows in surprise, seeing a brief look of affection pass between the two.

Perhaps the gulf that has grown between them isn’t so insurmountable after all.

They arrived at the grand door and were ushered inside by an elderly maid, who led them to a grand parlor. Inside, a whole group of people waited. Tabitha felt a little self-

conscious under their stares, but she didn't have much time to dwell on it as a thin, spindly man with a too-wide smirk stood to greet them.

“Well, if it isn't young Daniel!” the man said in a booming voice that didn't match his appearance at all. “And you brought the woman!”

“I brought my wife, *Mrs. Roberts*, yes,” Daniel said through gritted teeth. “And her sister, Miss Tabitha Oakley. Ladies, this is Mr.

Barton, the host of the party.”

Tabitha didn't like the way Barton's too-bright eyes swept up and down her body. She retreated a few steps, trying to make it less obvious that she was doing so by pretending to stumble and catching Laura's arm.

“Hm,” Barton said, taking a step forward.

“So, do tell me, young lady. Do you prefer Tabitha or Tabby?”

“From people I barely know, I prefer Miss

Oakley, sir,” Tabitha said in a forced polite tone. “And since we are not yet properly acquainted . . .”

At the other end of the room, a man chuckled, though Tabitha didn’t see who it was. Her eyes were on Barton, who looked as if he was flaring with anger at her comment. He stepped forward, the barely controlled rage behind his eyes at odds with the oily smoothness in his voice as he took her hand and kissed it.

“Well, *Miss Oakley*,” he said softly. “I cannot *wait* to get to know you better.”

Tabitha tried her best not to grimace, but she felt as if her skin was trying to crawl off of her body. What sort of man *was* he?

“Still!” Barton said, taking a step back into the center of the room. “What a wonderful day this is! All my guests are here at last! Sit, newcomers, and allow me to introduce you all.”

Tabitha and the other two did as they were bid. Tabitha was honestly just relieved to be nowhere near Barton anymore as she took a seat as far away from him as she could physically manage.

Barton started to go around the guests one by one, and Tabitha's unease faded. This was it—this was the moment she'd grab the first impressions of a whole new group of people. Perhaps to others, this might not be a big deal, but to Tabitha, who saw a story in everything, this was the difference between a

good novel and no words at all.

“First, allow me to introduce the esteemed Lady Alma Wells,” Barton said, gesturing to a woman in the corner. She was somewhere between fifty and sixty years old, if Tabitha had to guess; her hair had turned to gray but her dark eyes were still filled with pride and haughtiness. “Her father was Lord Kevin Smith, Baron of Richter, you know, and the late Mr. Harry Wells was a great business partner of mine.”

Is that a look of anger I just saw in her eyes? What could have caused it?

If the look had existed, Lady Wells covered it immediately, and she nodded to all of the guests with something closely approximating a smile.

“Next, we have the Paddingtons. John, Janet, and Joanna are close friends of mine,” said Barton. He indicated three people sitting close by. The two women were clearly mother and daughter. The younger, who looked to be

the same age as Tabitha, looked like a clone of her mother. Both had long blonde hair and brown eyes. Mr. Paddington, meanwhile, was dark-haired with gray streaks and bright blue eyes.

“We’re not your friends, Barton,” Mrs. Paddington said with barely disguised contempt.

“Janet, please,” Mr. Paddington said, wringing his hands. “Mr. Barton has been kind enough to invite us all here . . .”

“I would prefer Mr. Barton did us all the favor of dropping dead,” the woman replied caustically.

Barton just laughed, though Tabitha heard a cruel mockery behind the amusement.

“Dear Mrs. Paddington, I’m afraid you will have to wait quite a while before that dream can be fulfilled,” he said. “In the meantime, allow me to introduce everyone to Mr. Basil Grisham, my closest associate, and the beautiful woman next to him, my dear Leona.”

“Mrs. Grisham,” Mr. Grisham corrected a little irritably.

“Mrs. Leona Grisham, of course, is what I meant to say,” Mr. Barton replied without a pause.

Tabitha narrowed her eyes, wondering just what the relationship was there. Mrs. Grisham was tall and thin with beady little eyes that kept darting between her husband—himself short, fat, and balding—and the near-

skeletal figure of Barton. An affair? A past romance?

Perhaps it is nothing at all and I am simply letting my imagination run wild!

“I already introduced you all to Mr. Roberts and his companions,” Barton went on. “And finally, of course, my partner at Hatcher and Barton, the incomparable young man who took over from his father, Mr. Reginald Hatcher.”

Tabitha looked over to the same corner where laughter had come from earlier to finally see the mysterious Reginald. Her heart almost stopped in her shock. He was as Laura had described—tall, sandy blond hair, an intelligent pair of brown eyes. He was as Daniel had described, too—smiling, bright, and he obviously had a sense of humor.

But what neither of them had thought to mention to Tabitha—in what she considered a rather rude and glaring omission, truth be told—was that he would *also* be the most

handsome man that she had ever seen in her life.

It seemed as if fate was conspiring to stop Reginald from talking to the most interesting woman he had ever seen. Over dinner, he was seated as far from Tabitha as was physically possible, then of course the men and the women were separated for drinks and smoking. He tried to speak to Daniel about her that night, but Daniel was clearly preoccupied

by thoughts of his own, and conversation kept turning back to Laura instead.

Reginald honestly wasn't sure what it was that intrigued him so much about Tabitha Oakley. He wasn't one for mysticism and specters, but she . . . well, she seemed to give off an *aura* of intrigue. He hadn't spoken a word to the raven-curled confident young woman, and yet he already knew he would have done anything to solve the mystery of who she was as a person.

*You're being ridiculous, Reginald. Just
speak to her!*

And yet there always seemed to be something in the way. Barton wanted to talk about business, or Grisham wanted to gloat, or Mrs. Paddington wanted to push her hapless daughter toward Reginald.

Soon—too soon—it was past time to turn in for the evening. There was a lot of fuss about sleeping arrangements, too. For some reason, Mrs. Paddington insisted that her

daughter share their suite, and so the Paddingtons were assigned a pair of conjoined rooms. The Grishams and the Robertses were of course given rooms of their own, while Tabitha and Lady Wells took a twin bedroom on the third floor.

Reginald, as a result, was the only one who managed to secure a room fully to himself. While he relished the privacy, he couldn't help but think back fondly on the late nights where he and Daniel had shared a twin room, laughing and scheming and joking

through the night. It was still strange to adjust to the fact that his friend was now married.

Reginald liked Laura—or at least, he liked what little he knew of her so far. She seemed reserved, but perhaps she was just shy. Certainly, for Daniel to be so smitten, there must be something glorious just under that surface of propriety.

Reginald smiled to himself in the dark. He remembered the day when Daniel had announced that he was now married. He

hadn't been able to stop extolling the virtues of his bride, and though shocked, Reginald couldn't remember ever being happier for his friend.

So, what is this feeling now? Jealousy?

Regret?

He had to admit, there was a little of the former, at least. Since his father had died and he'd had to return back home to take over the partnership of the firm, his own life had been on hold. In Cambridge, there had been a girl,

Colette, who worked in one of the local stores with her father. She and Reginald had a brief flirtation, and he knew that everyone had expected that they would court and eventually marry.

He would never admit it aloud, but though his father's death had been one of the most painful things he ever lived through, Reginald was thankful that he'd been pulled back to where he'd grown up. It had effectively ended the courtship with Colette before it even started, and saved Reginald

from making a decision one way or the other.

“The problem,” he mused out loud to himself in the dark, “was that Colette was an open book. She was pretty, yes, and intelligent enough. She knew how to hold a decent conversation. But there was nothing there to *discover*, no new adventures to take on.”

Our life together would have been terribly predictable. A short courtship, a conservative marriage, then she would quit her work to raise our children and I would have had very little to

do with the domestic sphere.

While Reginald fancied himself a sensible man, the idea of being trapped in the same routine forever sounded similar to a death sentence. He wanted love. He wanted passion. When he became a father—God willing—he wanted to be involved in the child's life, and he wanted his wife to have a life of her own as well as being a wife and mother.

The fact was that Reginald did not want a pretty blonde girl who obeyed her father and

baked bread, no matter how much he had tried to convince himself that he did back in Cambridge. He did not want a woman who would be a good, simple wife, a woman who fit all of the ideals of the helpmeet of a proper gentleman.

“I want a woman with dark curls and a mysterious allure,” he mumbled as sleep beckoned him. “I want a woman who can captivate with a glance, a woman who is not afraid to challenge trends and follow her passions.”

As Reginald started to fall asleep, he had a most troubling thought. It was probably the haze of dreams getting to him, and he would likely forget it in the morning, but something tugged insistently at his stomach, telling him that the woman he was describing was just down the hall.

Chapter 3

Inter Se

Mr. Sharpe was not a detective, but his legal training was always in the back of his mind. He knew that no party could simply be a party, and something—perhaps an animalistic instinct—told him that great disruption was afoot. Sharpe knew that he must find his allies before the night was out, for once whatever he sensed would happen indeed happened, it would change everything. Perhaps forever.

Excerpt from *Death in a Storm* (1818) by T.

Oakley, p. 34.

It wasn't until after dinner on the second night that Reginald finally managed to approach the Roberts and Tabitha alone. Miss Paddington was surrounded by her doting parents on the other end of the room while she tortured the pianoforte, Grisham was standing slightly back with pursed lips as Barton and Mrs. Grisham chatted a little too amiably, and Lady Wells was bending a young maid's ear.

“What did you say your name was?” the older woman demanded imperiously.

“It’s . . . I’m Alice, my lady,” the girl said. She couldn’t have been more than seventeen, and she stammered when she spoke.

“Well, *Alice*, does this look like *two* lemon slices in my water to you?” Lady Wells asked scornfully.

Reginald felt sorry for the girl, but it was all he could do to shoot her a sympathetic look on the way past. She caught his eye and smiled hesitantly. Reginald nodded at her then

continued, determined not to give up this chance to meet the woman who had captured all of his attention without so much as a word passing between them.

“And here’s Reggie!” Daniel said, sounding cheerful and perhaps a little in his cups. “I thought you were avoiding us, my friend!”

“Not at all,” Reginald replied, grinning as his usually-somber friend handed him some wine. He was not usually one for excessive

drinking, but there was something to be said about seeing Daniel so relaxed once in a while.

“Laura. You look wonderful tonight.”

“Thank you,” Laura replied, smiling at him and shooting a fond exasperated look at her husband. “Reginald, have you met my sister?”

“I don’t believe I’ve had the honor,” Reginald replied, hoping the anticipation didn’t show too much in his voice as he turned to the younger woman.

“This is Tabitha,” said Laura. “Tabitha, this gentleman is Reginald Hatcher, my husband’s business compatriot and friend.”

Tabitha smiled at him, her blue eyes almost seeming to scan his entire soul as she appraised him. “A pleasure, sir.”

“The pleasure is mine, Miss—er, Tabitha,” he replied, more sincerely than he could have ever imagined.

Tabitha chuckled. It was a gentle sound, like the ringing of little handbells. “Oh, good. You told him I have no patience for formalities. I am glad you were sensible enough to listen to my sister, Reginald.”

Hearing his name from her mouth so soon was strange, but he found himself taking enjoyment from it. “Were I sensible, I would have approached sooner. I hope you can forgive me the oversight.”

Reginald saw Daniel and Laura exchange

glances at that, but he could barely spare them a moment's thought. All of his attention was focused on Tabitha's smile.

“Won't you sit and chat a while?”

Tabitha asked him.

Reginald took the seat offered at the table. Laura suddenly stood, touching Daniel's arm.

“Dear, won't you come see the portrait on the other end of the room with me?” Laura

said.

“No, I—oh, yes,” Daniel said, standing up with a wink so obvious that Reginald couldn’t help but laugh.

When they were gone, and Tabitha and Reginald were relatively alone, Tabitha said, “You know, that almost sounded as if you were flirting with me.”

“I would never. That wouldn’t be proper,” Reginald replied virtuously.

“*Never?* Well, now, you might offend a woman with that kind of talk,” Tabitha teased.

Reginald felt an unfamiliar squirm of excitement in his stomach and he knew that he would keep this conversation going whatever it took. “Well then, in fear of offending you, perhaps we should change the subject,” he said.

“Indeed,” Tabitha replied mischievously. “To what shall we change it? The weather? It’s

very drizzly.”

“I think we should expect another storm,” Reginald agreed. “But we should find something other than the weather.”

“ Perhaps we should gossip about our fellow party-goers,” Tabitha suggested. She had a wicked sparkle in her eye. “I heard that Lady Wells’ husband died under mysterious circumstances. Some say she killed him all those years ago.”

Reginald snorted. “Not unless she scared him to death. He was terrified of her, but only because she thinks that her hereditary title makes her actual nobility and so expected the poor watchmaker to act like it. It *was* mysterious, though. There are some rumors that . . . oh, I shouldn’t say.”

“Ah, but you must now,” Tabitha pleaded. “It’s just you and me. Go on, please.”

“Well, *some* say that he might have committed the gravest sin of all. He was in a

lot of debt, you know,” Reginald replied in a conspiratorial whisper.

“And what do you think?” Tabitha whispered back. “Is this all something to do with Mr. Barton?”

I think Barton is a monster and Lady Wells wants her revenge for his driving her husband to take his own life.

“I think that Lady Wells has been questioned about it quite enough,” he said out

loud. “And we can all have our theories, but Mr. Wells’ loss was tragic in any case.”

Tabitha smiled a little at that. “You seem a good man,” she said. “I hope Daniel is as good a man as you are, for my sister’s sake.”

Reginald nodded. “Daniel is a little awkward, but yes, he *is* a good man,” he replied. “Though I would say that, I suppose. We have been friends since childhood. His only flaw is his obsession with his family rivalry.”

“Laura tells me that he and Barton hate each other,” Tabitha mused. “Something about land borders?”

Reginald nodded, though didn't expand. It was up to Daniel to share that story if he wanted.

“It seems nobody much likes Barton. Except Grisham, of course,” Tabitha continued.

“Oh, Grisham is his lapdog,” Reginald said, unable to keep as straight a face this time. “And Mrs. Grisham used to be Barton’s lover, if rumors are true.”

Tabitha glanced over to the Grishams and Barton and nodded. “I’d say there’s still unresolved tension there,” she said, obviously observing Barton and Mrs. Grisham’s conversation and Mr. Grisham’s discomfort. “Wouldn’t you?”

Reginald’s lip quirked. “It would be

awfully forward of me to make such wild speculations about my peers,” he replied. “And I’m certainly not used to a woman doing such.”

“Does it bother you?” she asked, amused.
“Should I behave more properly?”

“Not at all. But I have not yet heard your conjectures about the Paddingtons. If you are a people-watcher like you seem to be, then I’m sure you have a wealth of ideas about the three of them,” Reginald encouraged.

Truthfully, he was finding her observations fascinating in their accuracy.

“Oh, they’re easy. I spoke with Joanna earlier today. We’re the same age, you know, and though she’s a lovely girl, she’s not very bright,” Tabitha said. “Her father is deeply in debt, and he hopes Mr. Barton will help him out. I think Mr. Paddington has a half-baked idea that Joanna should marry our host.”

“Hm,” Reginald said. “That’s . . . certainly a possibility.”

“Mrs. Paddington won’t allow it, though,” Tabitha went on with a shrug. “I do not think I have ever been to a party where so many people detested the man in charge of it.”

Reginald bit back a laugh. “I can neither confirm nor deny this. And of course, I would never dream to speak badly of my own business partner. But enough of Barton, what about you? You obviously have a keen sense of intuition. Your sister said you were a fan of mystery novels?”

“Oh, yes,” Tabitha replied, her eyes sparkling with sudden excitement. “Horror and mystery and books that make a person *think*, you know? Is that something which interests you?”

“I must admit that I have not explored the genre particularly thoroughly,” Reginald replied. “But since you give such a hearty recommendation, I may need to pursue it. Laura tells me you’re a fan of Mrs. Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, and indeed I have a copy waiting

for me in my room.”

“That is a stellar novel indeed,” Tabitha replied with infectious enthusiasm. “The book I am reading now is more or less based in the fantastic. It is based on the myth of Bluebeard—you know of it?”

“I do,” Reginald replied.

“Well, the heroine is a young woman who has been married off to a man with whom she begins to expect something is very

amiss. She is currently trying to find her way out of the bedroom he has locked her in and discover what happened to all of her husband's previous wives. The hero detective, Hawthorne, is working to save her life. It's very nerve-racking!" Tabitha told him. "If you like, I could loan it to you once I have finished reading."

"I'd like that very much," Reginald agreed with a smile. They talked books a little longer until Laura took over at the pianoforte and a beautiful tune began to play.

“Oh!” Tabitha said. “I love this song!
Laura and I learned it together as girls.”

“Well,” Reginald suggested, emboldened
by her conversation and by the wine. “Would
you dance to it with me?”

Tabitha blushed, but she was clearly
pleased. “Oh, well, yes!” She laughed. “I was
hoping that you would ask, but most men
aren’t so forward with such things.”

“I am not most men,” Reginald replied, grinning as they stood and he led her to an empty spot near the pianoforte. “And neither are you most women.”

Tabitha stepped forward and Reginald placed a hand on the small of her back and took her hand with his free one. They began to move in time with the music, not too slow as to be overly-intimate, but also not too fast as to prevent conversation.

“Tell me,” Tabitha said as they swayed

together. "What is it like to work so closely with Mr. Barton? Even his closest friends seem to despise him. You, however, I can't seem to work out."

Reginald barely managed to stop himself blurting out his real opinion. Instead, he avoided the question by saying, "Enough talk of business. Did you enjoy the season?"

Tabitha frowned, but thankfully went along with his subject change. "I did," she replied. "Laura came out of it with a husband,

of course, but I had no such luck. Between you and me, I find society folk dreadfully boring. All those stuck-up men and simpering ladies! I only continue to attend because I enjoy the dances and parties.”

Reginald grinned. “You do not hold back on your commentary about the world, do you?” he asked.

She shrugged. “What would be the point? People disapprove just as loudly when I whisper as they do when I speak plainly. It is a

shame though. I do enjoy the idea of a husband and a family. But these men are just . . . not the ones for me. And how about you? Are you married?"

Reginald considered the question, then shook his head. "No. Not at all. I happen to find society women rather boring as well."

Tabitha arched an eyebrow. "You've never even courted?"

"I've had a few flirtations," he admitted.

“But never anything that might seriously lead to me presenting an offer. When I marry, I want a woman who stands on her own, not one who acts as an extension of myself.”

“Hear, hear,” Tabitha replied approvingly. The tempo of the music changed, and their feet moved in tandem to keep up.

“Still, you are a very handsome man. I am surprised you have been allowed to stay single.”

Reginald laughed, half in amusement and

half in surprise. “You are a flatterer, Miss Oakley!”

Tabitha grinned. “Or I just speak openly in a world where very few will, Mr. Hatcher. Do you find me inappropriate?”

“Terribly so,” Reginald teased. She caught the joke, smiling slightly at him, and he felt as if she had rewarded him with riches. No gold could match the power of that smile. “And I? I don’t suppose you find it gentlemanly of me to call lovely young women

boring.”

“Hm, that is a true concern,” Tabitha agreed, pretending to be thoughtful. “I suppose how I react to it depends on just one question. Do you find *me* boring?”

Normally, Reginald had better control over himself. Normally, he would have been able to restrain himself and make either a quip or an avoidant polite comment.

But dancing with this woman is not my

normal.

“No,” he said. “In fact, I think you may be the least boring woman I have ever met.”

Tabitha blinked, obviously surprised by the sincerity in his voice. She quickly covered up her expression with one of amusement and said, “What, more interesting than Miss Paddington? Her mother is going to be distraught if she hears.”

“Mrs. Paddington is going to be

distraught about anything she hears from anyone,” Reginald countered. “She is the kind of fine Englishwoman who takes great joy in finding personal offense no matter what the circumstances.”

Both of them laughed at that. The song lasted a little longer, and when it was over, Reginald and Tabitha headed over to congratulate Laura on her performance.

“You played wonderfully, Lu,” Tabitha told her.

“Lu! You haven’t called me that since we were children!” Laura said, laughing. “Have you been drinking from the same cup as my husband?”

“I am not drunk,” Daniel insisted, in a tone that Reginald knew he only ever reached after three or four cups of wine. “I am simply enjoying the party and my lovely wife.”

Laura blushed deeply. She seemed at a loss for words.

“It seems Danny has been imbibing some liquid courage,” Reginald noted to Tabitha in an undertone, and was delighted to hear her giggle.

“I’m perfectly sober,” Daniel insisted.

“Reggie is simply deflecting. Did you see how he was looking at your sister as they danced out there, my love? I think we may have another wedding heading our way in a not-too-distant future.”

It was Reginald's turn to feel embarrassed, and Tabitha's to blush.

“That's enough, Daniel,” Laura scolded him, though not before Reginald saw the small smirk on her face. She was about to say something else, but suddenly all of the other party guests were there, each of them swooping down to congratulate Laura on her performance.

Reginald smiled at Tabitha then stepped back to give the others some room. His eyes

were still on the younger woman when
someone touched his arm.

“Everything all right there, son?” came
the too-smooth voice of Gregory Barton in his
ear.

*Don't call me son. You know I despise it.
I'm fairly certain that you do it on purpose.*

“I'm quite fine, Greg,” he replied in faux-
cheer. “Thank you for the invite. I was
delighted to receive it.”

“You’d be more delighted to see me in the ground and young Roberts in my place,” Barton chortled. Reginald kept his face as straight as he could, but he couldn’t deny a certain correctness there.

God forgive me, but He took the wrong man when my father died and Barton lived.

“Don’t worry,” Barton said. “I admire it in you. I’m glad you hate me. It makes our partnership much more fun, especially since

you could never live up to your father.”

He started to laugh, and Reginald clenched his fists but said nothing. Barton was trying to bait him—embarrass him in front of everyone—and Reginald would *not* allow it.

“Anyway, I noticed you dancing with Roberts’s sister-in-law,” Barton went on after a while of chuckling at his own terrible joke. “Tell me, is she claimed by anyone?”

“Claimed?” Reginald asked. “Is she a

horse?”

“Well, it will be a lucky gentleman who breaks her in,” Barton replied. Reginald shuddered at the anticipation in his voice.

“Perhaps, since Miss Paddington is otherwise occupied, I should get to know young Miss Oakley instead.”

“I thought you were a sworn bachelor,” Reginald asked, trying to not let the very sudden flaming anger get to him. “Isn’t that why Mrs. Grisham married Mr. Grisham

instead?”

Barton’s eyes widened a fraction about such things being spoken openly, then looked back and forth between Tabitha—who was still speaking with Laura—and Reginald. Reginald did not like the look of calculation in the older man’s eyes.

“Well,” Barton said slowly, dark amusement playing on his lips. “My dear, dear man. Who said anything about *marriage*?”

With another laugh, he walked away.

Reginald stood there, stunned. His brain was scrambled by the awful implications of what Barton had just said, so much so that he didn't notice Daniel approach him.

“You look as if you saw a ghost, Reg,” he said, clapping his friend on the arm. “What did that donkey rear say to you?”

“He made some untoward comments about your sister-in-law,” Reginald said in

disgust.

Daniel scowled. "He's a menace.

Someone needs to put a stop to him."

"You're drunk, Danny," Reginald told him, though he couldn't deny that a dark part of him saw a kind of sense in what Daniel was saying. Everyone here would benefit if Barton just somehow disappeared.

Mr. Paddington's debts would ease, as much of what he owed was to Barton himself.

Miss Paddington would be free of the pressure to be paraded in front of him by her father, and Mrs. Paddington could stop worrying about her daughter.

Lady Wells would benefit, too, Reginald knew. He looked at the old woman. Rumors said she wished to marry Barton, but Reginald knew this was false. Lady Wells hated the man for killing her husband—or at least, driving him to his own death.

And there were the Grishams. That was a

relationship that Reginald had never really understood. Mr. Grisham would profit financially from Barton's disappearance, and would also lose the pressure of the man's history with his wife.

Yes, perhaps we would all be better off without him.

Reginald froze, startled by his own dark thoughts. He wasn't even entirely sure where all of that had come from.

“I’m just saying, our lives would be better without him in them,” Daniel muttered under his breath.

And for the life of him, Reginald could not find a way to disagree.

Chapter 4

Animus Nocendi

Miss Willoughby was not born to a life of excitement. She had lived plainly and well up until now, and part of her had always expected she would live that way until the day she died. But when she heard the pattering of rain against the windowsill and the crash of the thunder that accompanied it, she could smell danger in the air—and it thrilled her.

Excerpt from *Death in a Storm* (1818) by T.

Oakley, p. 72.

Tabitha had only twenty pages left of her

novel, and she was determined to finish reading it tonight. If she did, then perhaps she would finally be able to start on her own writing properly tomorrow evening. She held her breath in the flickering candlelight as the hero approached the hidden door and—

“*Must* you read such trash parading itself as literature?” demanded Lady Wells in her haughty, plummy voice. “Honestly. When I was your age, young ladies would never *dream* of wasting their mental energy on things like this.”

“When you were my age, they still executed women for witchcraft in Europe,” Tabitha retorted. “Come, my lady, allow a poor girl to read as I will.”

“Hmph,” Lady Wells said. “I don’t see why I had to share a room with you. You are young enough to be my daughter, though no daughter of mine would speak as you do.”

I’m young enough to be your granddaughter, you unpleasant thing.

“My father was a baron, you know,” Lady Wells continued. “I was taught to behave *properly*.”

“Forgive me if I offended you, Lady Wells,” Tabitha replied. “I’m sure Mr. Barton meant for us to be friends, putting us in a room together like this. However, I only wish to finish my book, and what material I choose to read has no impact upon you that I can see.”

Lady Wells sniffed as if she didn't entirely agree with Tabitha's analysis of the book, but when she spoke, it was about the other part of the sentence. "Friends, pah. Barton put me in here with you to torture me. He's a menace, girl, and you'd do best to stay away from him."

"What do you mean?" Tabitha asked.

"Mr. Barton is somehow dangerous to me?"

Lady Wells actually laughed. "Don't play coy. You're a very young woman of passing

attractiveness and possessing a sharp tongue.

Mr. Barton devours your type with his
afternoon tea.”

Tabitha shuddered at the unpleasant
image. Seeming satisfied that she had made
Tabitha uncomfortable, Lady Wells went back
to ignoring her. Tabitha tried not to think
about what the older woman had said as she
returned to her book. She lost herself in the
pages, distracted once again by the story, until

“Oh, dear. Oh my. Oh, no,” Lady Wells sighed.

Tabitha tried to ignore her. The sighs built and became more pointed, until eventually Tabitha ground her teeth together and said, “Is there something else, my lady?”

“No, no, you suit yourself,” Lady Wells replied. “Don’t worry about an old woman and her exhaustion. Your candlelight may keep me awake and leave me tired and frail, but by all means, do as you will.”

Keeping her voice as even as she could manage, Tabitha said, “Would you like me to put out the candle, Lady Wells?”

“Only if it isn’t a *terrible* inconvenience to you,” Lady Wells replied.

Tabitha smiled thinly then leaned over and turned it out. She would finish her book in the morning before breakfast. Apart from Reginald, nothing particularly exciting was likely to happen at this party, anyway.

A few hours later, Tabitha awoke with a start as thunder crashed loudly outside. She sprung up in her bed, looking wildly around the room as it was briefly illuminated by the lightning. Lady Wells was not in her bed.

Tabitha took a moment to catch her breath. She'd been having some strange dream, though it had fled her mind the second she opened her eyes.

Lady Wells has probably gone to use the chamber pot. I must calm down.

She took a few steadying breaths and slipped out of bed, padding softly on the wooden floor toward the window. The rain was so thick outside that she could see it as almost a white sheet against the dark sky, blowing this way and that in the harsh wind and rattling against the panes which were also shaking with every boom of thunder. The lightning was bright enough that it lit the full

room each time.

It was, Tabitha realized, a good thing that this party was to last a full week. This countryside valley was pretty, but if the weather stayed so bad, it would soon be inaccessible from the outside—and they would have no way home. Hopefully, by the time the party was over, the weather would finally clear.

Tabitha eventually headed back to bed, closing her eyes and listening to the howling

storm. She must have been awake for a long time, at least an hour, but she never saw nor heard Lady Wells return.

She was ninety percent sure that this was a dream, but that knowledge was not making Tabitha feel any less terrified now. She stood on a small makeshift raft in the middle of a storm, screaming her voice hoarse against the battering rain. In the distance, a small, caged figure was calling Tabitha's name, desperately begging for

help. Tabitha dropped to her knees, paddling with her hands in the water, trying to propel herself forward.

“Tabby! Help me!” Laura shrieked as water began to fill her cage. “Please, please help me! I don’t want to drown! I don’t want to die!”

“Hold on, Laura!” Tabitha screamed back, but suddenly a wave crashed over her and she fell into the sea. She screamed, and dark shapes appeared around her. At first, she thought they were sharks—but they were people, horribly

deformed people with the faces of those at the party.

Tabitha opened her mouth to scream, but felt water rush into her lungs. She knew she would soon pass out and then it would be too late for herself and Laura both.

Then there was a strong pair of arms around her waist and a familiar flash of sandy blond hair. Reginald held her tight as he pulled her back to the surface.

Tabitha spluttered. They were still in danger, and she still had no idea how to save Laura, but as she gulped in air, she clung tightly to Reginald. They'd be each other's lifeline.

She jolted awake from the dream, feeling flushed and confused as early dawn light filtered through the window, muffled by the dark gray of the sky. Lady Wells was back in bed, snoring heavily—it was too early to really be awake, though Tabitha knew there would be no getting back to sleep for her.

Tabitha took a few deep breaths. It was silly to get so worried from nothing but a dream, but a deep fear still tightened her belly. It had felt so real! She was still half-convinced that Laura was somehow in some sort of danger, but of course it was far too early and far too improper to go down to the room where her sister was staying and check.

Calm down, Tabitha. It was a silly dream.

Let's finish our book.

It was still too dark to read thanks to the

horrid weather, but given how heavily Lady Wells was snoring, Tabitha thought that it would be quite safe to relight the candle again. She smiled a little as she did so—her parents were always scolding her about using up their candles to facilitate her reading—and then picked up her book.

A great battle between the hero and the villain had started, with the heroine gasping at the side as heroines in these books were wont to do. It was quite exciting, and it finished in a satisfying manner—the hero won the day,

married the heroine, etcetera—but as Tabitha closed the book, she couldn't help but feel a sense of disappointment.

How much better would the book have been if the woman had been actively involved in bringing down her murderous, traitorous husband! How it would have thrilled Tabitha if the hero and heroine worked together, building a love based not on her admiration of him, but on a mutual respect for the other's skills!

Well, that is why I must write a book of my own. My hero and heroine shall be intellectual equals.

She smiled a little at this thought. Her parents thought her utterly ridiculous to want to dedicate her life to becoming a *novelist*.

“That’s all very well for women who are riding on the coat-tails of their husband like Shelley’s wife,” her father had sniffed.

“Or those scandalous women who wear

trousers and refuse to marry like that Austen woman I heard about! I heard she was a burden on her brothers until her death last year,” her mother had added.

Tabitha didn't mind. They could think what they wanted—but *she* would write. Words were her life. They sang sweet songs, making pictures when she used them as easily as when a painter used paint. She wanted to tell stories, to share her passion with the world—and *she would*. For every person who did not think she should write, there would be

those who would want her works; she just needed to start writing them.

Perhaps she would start now since the candle was still burning. She took out some paper and hesitated. The fully realized idea for her novel had not yet come, but she thought that perhaps it may be a good writing exercise to transcribe her dream.

She began to write it down, still quite surprised by how terribly vivid it had been. Even though she knew for sure now that it had

been a dream, she still felt a lump in her throat at the image of Laura trapped in that cage, slowly sinking beneath the waves.

Breathe, Tabby. It was a dream. Only a—

Her thoughts were interrupted by a loud, protracted scream. It was a woman's voice.

Lady Wells shot awake. "What in the world—?"

The woman screamed again.

Tabitha started running.

Chapter 5

In Articulo Mortis

Nobody could pretend that Mr. Blake had been a beloved man. Far from it. He was a bully and a villain. However, to see his body there shook Miss Willoughby to her core. How could a man who was so full of life—vile though he may have been—be dead by the next morning?

Excerpt from *Death in a Storm* (1818) by T.

Oakley, p. 82.

Reginald ran out of the room as soon as he heard the woman's scream. He recognized

horror when he heard it. He had become a financial solicitor because of his father, but before that he had been training as a criminal lawyer and investigator. He'd been at one crime scene, shadowing a detective, and he still remembered the horrified scream of the widow who had walked in on the body.

This was the same scream. And it terrified him.

He bolted down the corridor, almost bumping into Daniel and Laura, who both

emerged from their room looking pale and alarmed.

“Who—?” Daniel asked.

“I don’t—” Reginald started.

Another scream, a different woman this time, interrupted them. The men exchanged glances and began to hurry toward the source, Laura following only a little behind.

Everyone else was already there. They all

stood in a semi-circle at the top of the stairs, and when Reginald pushed through, he saw what they were looking at. Barton was pale in death, his eyes wide and mouth open as if he'd been taken by surprise. A maid—the young girl, Alice—stood by his body weeping. Laura gasped, her hands flying to her mouth.

“What happened?” Reginald asked numbly, not able to fully work out exactly what emotion he was feeling as he stared down at the lifeless body of his hated business partner. “How did it happen?”

Mrs. Grisham was quietly weeping. Mr. Grisham looked ready to faint. Mrs. Paddington's expression was carefully guarded, but her daughter was openly sobbing while her husband tried to hide a clear look of relief. Lady Wells looked stricken, as well.

"I . . . Miss Paddington and I, we just found him like this, sir," Alice sobbed.

Tabitha walked forward slowly, kneeling down beside the body as if in a trance. As

Reginald watched, she gently closed the dead man's eyes with a shaky hand. "H-He was . . . murdered," Tabitha said softly. "I-I don't see any wounds, nor marks on his neck. And it doesn't look like he fell down the stairs either."

"Poison, then," Reginald murmured.

Tabitha looked up at him and nodded gravely.

"What is the meaning of this?" Mr.

Grisham finally blustered. "Tell me! One of you must know!"

“One of *us*?” Mrs. Paddington demanded waspishly. “One of us, Basil? This is your home. Perhaps *you* did this! Perhaps you’d grown sick of how he ogled your wife! Tell me, did you offer to host just for this?”

“Don’t talk to my husband like that, Janet!” Mrs. Grisham snarled. “*Your* weak excuse for a man is more likely to have done this. Now he’s free of his debts!”

Chaos erupted as everyone began to

scream at once, accusing one another so rapidly of committing the horrible crime that Reginald could barely keep up. Laura hurried to comfort the sobbing Miss Paddington and the pale maid while Daniel got caught up in the argument.

Reginald stepped back, moving beside Tabitha as she stepped away from the body. “Are you all right?” he asked her.

“No. This is horrible. Who would do this? Will there be another victim soon? We have to

find out who did this otherwise we're going to end up with more dead bodies," Tabitha told him.

Reginald squared his shoulders. He could see that she was visibly shaken by this, and the arguments of the other guests where not helping the situation. But she was right; he had to put a stop to this immediately.

He cupped his hands around his mouth and called out, "Ladies and gentlemen, stop this at once!" So surprised was everyone by

the bellow that they did as he asked, all eyes swinging around to face him. He stumbled for a moment, taken aback, then straightened and solidified his resolve. "We solve nothing with this bickering," he continued a little more strongly. "We must fetch the constables at once!"

"I'll go," Grisham volunteered.

"You would. It would give you the *perfect* chance to get away," Mrs. Paddington accused.

“Well, if we let *you* go, you’ll run, you vicious harpy!” Lady Wells cried out.

“*Harpy?*” Mrs. Paddington started angrily.

“Stop!” Tabitha cried out. Again, they all stopped at the call, though this time it seemed to be because most of them had no real idea who Tabitha *was*. “Stop. *I* will go. I’m the only person that we all know for sure could not have been involved, after all. I didn’t even

know Barton until I arrived here.”

Reginald held his breath as the others muttered, then, thankfully, Lady Wells nodded.

“She was in the room the whole night, besides,” Lady Wells sniffed. “Burning her annoying candle.”

Reginald noticed that Tabitha gave Lady Wells a strange look at that and filed the information away for later.

“We can’t send her alone out into that storm,” the maid, Alice, said in a quiet voice.

“It could kill a person.”

“I won’t let any of the others out of my sight,” Lady Wells declared.

“Oh, *what* sight, Alma? You’re an old hag,” Mrs. Grisham said.

“Alice, how about you escort Miss Oakley so that you have each other for company?”

Reginald suggested. He didn't like the idea of the two young women out without any help, but it was better than Tabitha going alone.

Nobody raised any objections to that, though Laura did look uncomfortable. Tabitha and Alice went off to prepare for their trip—it was a fair hike to the nearby village where the lone local constable lived, and they had no drivers here—and Reginald turned back to the scene.

Barton was dead. He was dead, and

Reginald neither felt happy nor sad. He was horrified at the murder, of course, and secretly relieved to lose a terrible business partner, but as to how he actually *felt* . . . he just didn't know.

“We should move the body,” Grisham said gruffly.

“No,” Daniel said quickly. “No. The constable will want to look at it before we do that.”

“The real problem is that if this is a murder, I’m not entirely sure how we are to get an inspector down here,” Reginald said, gesturing to a nearby window to display the horrible weather outside. “The roads in and out of the valley may be flooded by now.”

“And the storm is supposed to last for days,” Miss Paddington said quietly.

“Are you telling me that we could be stuck in this building with a cold-blooded murderer for *days*?” Mrs. Grisham demanded.

“Poison is a woman’s weapon, or so they say,” Mr. Grisham noted.

“I am your *wife!*” she immediately snarled, swelling like a bullfrog in her rage.

Mr. Grisham seemed to retreat back on himself. “No, no, dear, I didn’t mean—”

“He meant that *I* did it,” Mrs. Paddington scoffed. “Well, let me tell you—”

As the arguing started up again, Reginald signaled to Daniel. The two men backed away from the semi-circle and, a few seconds later, Laura joined them. The three of them entered a nearby room and closed the door behind them, blocking out what they could of the noise.

“My God,” Daniel said, putting his back to the door and sliding down into a sitting position. “Barton is dead. Can you believe it?”

“Try not to sound so pleased about it

when the constable questions you,” Reginald suggested dryly.

Daniel frowned. “You don’t suspect me, do you, Reg? I know I was a little tipsy last night, but I wasn’t *that* drunk. I hated the old fool, but not enough to kill him.”

“Of course I don’t suspect you,” Reginald assured him, though a twinge of guilt went through him when he realized that this wasn’t entirely true. He didn’t *think* that Daniel was capable of such a thing—but he hadn’t

thought Barton would show up murdered,
either.

“I do hope that Tabitha is all right,”

Laura said worriedly, hurrying over to the window and peering out. “The storm only seems to be getting worse. She must be in such shock, seeing a body like that.”

“And you aren’t?” Reginald asked.

“My wife wasn’t involved, either,” Daniel snapped.

Reginald held up his hands. Even Laura seemed surprised by the ferocity in Daniel's voice. "I didn't mean anything by it, Danny," Reginald said cautiously. "I was just surprised. Laura is still a very young woman, and it was a shocking sight."

Laura smiled faintly, though she was still pale and looking haunted. "I . . . well, I have been practicing as a midwife," she admitted. "Daniel said he did not mind, and the women in the village need someone to help them . . ."

Reginald blinked in surprised. “Really?”
he asked. “That . . . well, that is surprising.”

Laura nodded. “I . . . well, Mother and Father would have never approved. One of the reasons that I married Daniel was that he encouraged me to do whatever I wanted. And what I want is to help people.”

“So, she’s seen her fair share of injuries and even dead bodies, is the point,” Daniel said. “And besides, she wouldn’t—”

“I’m not accusing her,” Reginald insisted, but he was gentler this time. “We’re all just . . . shocked and scared. I think the best thing that we can do is sit tight and wait for the constable. There’s nothing else for it at this point.”

Daniel nodded. “Then we wait for the maid and Tabitha.”

“We wait,” Laura agreed, sinking into the window seat and returning to her vigil.

“We wait,” said Reginald quietly, then the three of them sat in silence and anticipation and said nothing more.

Just a few hours before the party guests arrived at the murder scene, Gregory Barton’s killer sat next to the body in a daze, holding his hand as it slowly went cold. The killer’s complex emotions warred inside their head, and they had no idea about how they were

supposed to feel. Were they happy that Barton was dead? Vindicated? Victorious? Or perhaps they should be sad, or scared, or even horrified.

The person who killed Barton wasn't any of these things. They just felt . . . numb.

Once the body felt like ice to the killer's touch, they let go of his hand and stood. It was still dark outside, a few hours until sunrise, and the only light flickered so much that it may as well have been complete blackness.

The tray with the cups sat on the table at the top of the stairway, neat and upright. Barton had placed them there himself, declaring to the figure who had walked by his side that he felt unwell. The figure was ordered to go to his chambers to prepare medicine that he would take later on, leaving him alone on the stairs. He was unsteady as he walked as if he were drunk then he'd started to rush down the stairs. He'd collapsed before he'd gone a few more steps.

He'd stared up at the hallway, his body

twitching as the life pulsed from it. He'd met his killer's eyes, and the killer had stared back, unblinking.

“Why?” Barton rasped. “Why?”

“Because you don't even know why,” the killer responded. They didn't approach him at all until the moment he took his last breath and died right in front of them.

There was nobody left in the hallway. Just the killer and their victim. It was over. At

last, it was over.

Now, the person who was responsible for Barton's death retreated. They may have had mixed emotions, but they knew one thing—they would not be caught for this and hanged. Not on this man's account. They weren't afraid of death, but they would not die in a sham of justice. Barton's death was a favor to the world.

So, the killer retreated into a room nearby to wait. They would approach the body

again once someone else did. They knew that whoever it was would scream or yell, then they'd wait a few minutes for others to come running before hurrying out themselves.

Perhaps they could even sow discord between everyone here, and have them so focused on protecting themselves that they all turned on each other.

The person who had killed Gregory Barton didn't think of themselves as a killer. They were sorry that it had to end this way, sorry that there had been no other choice.

But they were not sorry that he had died alone and in pain. The only thing that ran through their mind was that they hoped God would forgive them for what they had done. For what they had to do.

Chapter 6

Scire Facias

There were several suspects in the death of the illustrious Mr. Gordon Blake—so many, in fact, that Miss Willoughby could barely keep all of them and their eccentricities in place in her mind. First was Lady Shaft, the daughter of a noble and wife of a common man who had been driven to suicide by Blake’s behavior. That an old woman could be involved was shocking—but she had the clearest motive of them all.

Excerpt from *Death in a Storm* (1818) by T.

Oakley, p. 91.

They dressed as warmly as they could, Tabitha loaning the young maid one of the three thick coats she had brought with her in case of this very worsening of the weather. Laura had laughed about it, claiming that they would be in the house the whole time and there was no need for such things, including the thick boots which Tabitha pulled onto her feet now.

If only you had been right, Laura. If only.

“Are you all right?” she asked Alice

gently. “That must have been quite a shock, finding the body like that. Did you know him well?”

Alice blinked and looked at her. “Oh, I . . . Miss Paddington discovered the body. I only came along once I heard her scream, and the others were already converging on the spot. I’ve only worked for Mr. Grisham for a year, so I don’t know any of his friends very well. Mr. Barton would come along quite often, though.”

Tabitha nodded. “And what was he like?” she asked as the two of them walked toward the front door. She braced herself then pulled it open. The pair of them were instantly met with a blast of rain to their faces, and a wind so strong that Tabitha could almost believe that it was trying to push them back inside.

“He was . . . odd,” Alice replied, yelling a little to be heard over the storm. The two women linked arms once the door closed behind them and set off into the storm. “The rest of the servants warned me to avoid him,

and I did for the most part.”

Perhaps because of the rumors that he has a taste for youthful women. How off-putting.

They didn't talk much over the half an hour it took them to traverse the valley and finally reach the edge of the village at the top of the hill. They couldn't, not without quickly losing all of the energy that was keeping them going despite the horrible weather and the shock of what had just happened.

They found the constable's office without much difficulty, and his secretary hurried them both inside. She was an older woman of perhaps sixty, and Tabitha was forcibly reminded of her late grandmother as she fetched them towels and blankets and steaming hot cups of tea.

“The constable will be with you soon, dears,” the secretary, who introduced herself as Margaret, told them. “Just sit tight here by the fire and dry off.”

“T—thank you,” Tabitha replied. She tried not to let her teeth chatter too much, but she must have failed, because the look that Margaret gave her was less than convinced.

The secretary eventually left the two of them alone in the waiting room, and Tabitha allowed the heat of the hearth to wash over her. The storm outside was so bad that she felt as though her very bones had been drenched by it, and though she thought they’d be all right to return to the house with the constable, it was becoming increasingly likely that they

would be stranded in the valley until the storm ended in a week's time.

Trapped in a house with a body. And a murderer.

To distract herself from that thought, Tabitha turned to the pensive maid. “You know,” she said. “The worst part of all of this is that I was planning on writing a book about a murder. This kind of incident is exactly what I had in mind. I know it’s silly, but I almost feel as though I caused this.”

Alice looked up from the fire, her face gaunt from the cold and shock. “You write books?” she asked, shivering.

Tabitha moved closer, putting an arm around the girl’s shoulder to help her warm up quicker. “I try to,” she corrected with a small laugh. “What about you? Do you do anything outside of your maid duties?”

“I’m just a maid, Miss,” Alice muttered.

“No mother or father alive for me to visit. No

life outside of the job. I'm thankful to Mr. Grisham for the opportunity he gave me by hiring me. More thankful than he will ever know."

"Mr. Grisham is a good man?" Tabitha asked, raising her eyebrows. From everything Reginald and Daniel had said, she hadn't really expected that.

Alice didn't answer immediately, but then she nodded slowly. "He's not a *bad* man," she said. "Mrs. Grisham is quite terrible, but

Mr. Grisham is capable of being quite kind.
He's just too easily influenced, partly by her
but even more by, well . . .”

“By Mr. Barton,” Tabitha guessed.

“My mother had always told me never to
speak ill of the dead, and so I will not,” Alice
replied. “But I imagine us Grisham servants
are likely to be relieved of quite a bit of
pressure now.”

That's very interesting. And it raises the

suspect pool significantly, too. There are at least six or seven members of staff still present in the house.

Tabitha still believed that the murderer was one of the guests—the timing was too precise for it to be otherwise—but she made a mental note to write all of this down later.

She knew that it was ghoulish, but part of her was a little excited about all of this. A man's death was horrid, of course, but she had come here looking for inspiration—and she

had found it. She would have preferred that it did not involve someone dying, but . . . oh, how good it would be for her book if the constable or even the inspector allowed her to shadow the investigation! Perhaps she could even interview the subjects, which would allow her to take notes that would lead—

“Miss Oakley?” a polite voice asked.

She looked up as the constable entered. He was a young man, somewhere between her own and Reginald’s age, thin with hair as

blond as a boy's and wide blue eyes. He did not look the part of the constable she had been envisioning, not even a little.

Stop it, Tabitha. This is real life. And real death.

“Yes,” she replied, standing up. “We’re sorry to burst in unannounced, but I’m afraid that I have come here with some terrible news to report.”

“My name is Travers,” the constable said.

“Tell me everything.”

She began to speak about everything that had happened since she had arrived at Barton’s manor, with Alice corroborating her story as she went. When she finished, she felt exhausted.

The constable’s eyes were wide and horrified. “A murder? In these parts?” he replied, obviously barely able to believe it. “And you say old Barton is dead? My God! That can’t be possible.”

“Regretfully, Constable, it is both possible and true,” Tabitha told him. “We simply must get back immediately. We do not know who could have done this terrible thing, and my sister and brother-in-law are there . . .”

As is Reginald. I barely know him, and yet I fear for him too.

“Yes, of course,” the constable said.

“Grandma, will you show these women to the

buggy? I'll gather some men and we'll all head back together."

"Of course, dear," Margaret said back.

"Come now, my loves."

"Your secretary is your grandmother?"

Tabitha asked. Everyone stared at her and she knew that it was an odd question to ask right at this moment—but on the other hand, the whole situation was beyond surreal.

"It's a small town," Travers replied

defensively, before Tabitha and Alice were hurried away.

The manor was still in chaos despite the hour it had taken to get to the constabulary and back. Tabitha heard Mrs. Paddington and Mrs. Grisham yelling at each other the second she walked through the door.

“All right, ladies,” Travers told them as his men pushed deeper into the house toward

the source of the noise. “You’ve both been soaked, and we can’t have you catching cold. Go and wash and change, then the maid should return to the servant’s quarters. You, Miss Oakley, will join us at the site of the murder. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Constable,” they said simultaneously, and hurried off to obey.

It felt wonderful to be in clean, dry clothes, and when Tabitha returned to the site where they had discovered the body, she

found that she was calmer than she had expected to be. She hoped that Alice was all right, but the maid all but fled from her mind when she saw the disaster before her.

Mr. Grisham had his arms fully around his wife's waist as though trying desperately to stop her flying forward into a fist fight. Mr. Paddington held his wife, too, and Reginald and Daniel each had one of Lady Wells' arms. Everyone was screaming, shouting, and yelling, except for the Paddington daughter and Laura. The younger woman was crying

again while Tabitha's sister attempted—with limited success—to comfort her once more.

Tabitha moved toward Reginald. “Have they not stopped since we left?” she asked.

Reginald smiled at her, which made her feel warm in a whole different way. He didn't let go of Lady Wells as he said, “Not at all.”

“All right now, ladies, that's quite enough,” Constable Travers said. He stepped in the middle of the attempted brawl, his

hands raised as if his interference, rather than the combined effort of all the men, was preventing the women from clawing each other's eyes out.

“Ladies!” Lady Wells demanded wildly. “*I* am a lady. *These* women are animals!”

“You’re mistaking your father’s rank for your own, you vicious banshee,” Mrs. Grisham hissed. “*You* are—”

“All right, all right, enough,” Tabitha

said, surprised by the command in her own voice. “A man is dead and you three are behaving worse than children. You should be ashamed of yourselves!”

All eyes turned to her. She stared back unblinkingly, though she had to force down a blush when she saw the way that Reginald was smiling.

“And who are you, again?” Mrs. Paddington said.

“My sister,” Laura interrupted. “And the only person with half a brain in this place.”

Tabitha coughed a little awkwardly. “I’m not sure I would go that far, but I do think we must get our attitudes in order. Constable Travers and his men have been kind enough to come all this way just to speak with us, and the last thing they need is a common brawl.”

The women all looked angry, but they grudgingly shoved their husbands off and stopped their fighting. They each stood with

their backs to one another, their arms folded. Tabitha struggled not to roll her eyes, but nodded sympathetically to Constable Travers who was waiting for permission to go on.

The constable herded the group into a side room and took a statement from each of them. As they were speaking, Tabitha couldn't help it—she took out her notebook and, in her and Laura's cipher, wrote down what they were saying.

in bed all night (not true). Had no grudge against Barton (also untrue).

- *Mr. Grisham – Appalled.*

Barton was his best friend. When asked about Barton's relationship with Mrs. Grisham, he went very quiet.

- *Mrs. Grisham –*

Heartbroken. Barton was one of her closest friends. Apparently wouldn't know how to kill if she tried.

- *Mrs. Paddington –*

Ambivalent. Openly admits to hating Barton, but claims she did not kill him (I believe her).

- *Mr. Paddington – Nervous.*

Says nothing of substance.

- *Miss Paddington – She was*

asleep all night and can't stop crying.

- *Laura – Upset about the*

death, didn't know Barton well.

- *Daniel – Refuses to comment at the present time, but ‘of course I didn’t bloody murder him’.*

- *All the servants need to be questioned about their whereabouts.*

- *Reginald – Stoic. Says he’d never think of such a thing.*

“And I,” Tabitha said, “didn’t know him, as I already told you. I only met the man two days ago, and the most involved I have been is

when I came to report his death.”

Constable Travers nodded slowly, snapping his own notebook shut. He gave Tabitha’s a questioning look, but didn’t actually comment.

Just then, there came a knock at the door. Travers called for the person to enter, and one of his men opened it and walked up to whisper in his ear. Travers listened carefully, nodded, and then turned back to the group.

“All right,” the constable said. “We’ve removed the body from the premises.

However, we have some bad news. Standard procedure is that I bring an inspector in to have a look and talk to you all properly.

Unfortunately, the storm makes that impossible for at least a few days. Until that time, I’m afraid you will all be confined to the house.”

“What?” Mr. Grisham demanded.

“You expect us to *stay* here with a *murderer*?” Mrs. Paddington demanded. “She’s right there! Lock her up!”

“If you’re talking about me, Janet, at least have the class to *say* so,” Mrs. Grisham snarled.

“I didn’t mention your name, Leona, but you sure did jump to that conclusion quickly!” Mrs. Paddington responded.

The two women looked ready to attack

each other again, but this time, Reginald got between them. “All right. Enough. *Enough*. Isn’t one tragedy enough?”

Lady Wells sniffed. “I’m not sure that *tragedy* is the correct word, young man, but you may have a point nonetheless.”

“That’s probably not something you should say before the constable, my lady,” Laura pointed out politely.

“I think you’ve all incriminated

yourselves fairly well,” Daniel added. “Come, Travers. I’ll escort you and your men to the door. I know where Grisham keeps his keys, so you can lock us in all you want. We’ll either be here or we’ll be dead by the time your inspector arrives.”

“I suppose if we kill each other off it will solve the problem,” Reginald mused as Daniel led Travers and the other man from the room.

“*Mr. Hatcher!*” Lady Wells protested, and even Laura looked a little shocked.

Tabitha, however, started to laugh. She'd seen the playful look in Reginald's eyes as he spoke—and truthfully, he probably wasn't too far off, given the way all of these people seemed ready to attack one another at the drop of a hat.

“So now what?” Mr. Paddington asked, wringing his hands. “We just . . . wait here?”

“We do,” Reginald confirmed.

“Grisham?”

Mr. Grisham hesitated. “Well,” he hedged. “There’s enough food in the kitchens to keep even a party of this size well-fed for a month or more.”

“Even more if the murderer strikes again,” Mrs. Grisham added, with a waspish look at both Mrs. Paddington and Lady Wells.

“Please stop,” Miss Paddington begged, speaking for the first time. Her face was wet with tears, her eyes so red that they must have

ached. "I cannot stand it. Poor Mr. Barton . . ."

"Barton would have had you with his evening meal if your mother had allowed it," Lady Wells scoffed.

"But he didn't deserve to die! *Nobody* deserves to die!" Miss Joanna Paddington protested. She looked wildly around for support. "Tell them, Miss Tabitha!"

Tabitha opened her mouth to agree, but she found herself hesitating. Nobody? She

didn't know Barton well enough to say either way, but she knew people, and there were some monsters at large in the world.

I should tell her what she needs to hear to feel better . . . but how can I go against my very morals?

She was saved from answering when Reginald said, "That's quite enough. I suggest that we all retire to our respective bedrooms to give ourselves some time to reflect on the situation. And, if it makes you feel better, both

my friend Daniel and I have legal training. If we will be here for an extended period of time, *I* will find the culprit.”

There was murmuring between the group, and then slowly they dispersed. Laura grabbed at Tabitha’s arm and told her to come to the room she shared with Daniel, and Tabitha was quick to agree. She had no desire to be alone with Lady Wells right now.

“Was that true, what you said?” she asked Reginald when only he, Laura, and

Tabitha herself remained in the room,
awaiting Daniel's return from downstairs.

“You intend to catch the culprit?”

He smiled faintly. “You intend to
dissuade me?” he asked.

“No,” she replied, feeling excitement
jumping in her stomach. She held up her
notebook to show him what she'd written
during the meeting. “I intend to help.”

Chapter 7

Lex Loci Delicti Commissi

For Mr. Sharpe, the most suspicious by far was the victim's own lackey, Mr. Brian Graves. Sharpe knew only too well the bitterness that Graves carried in his heart over how Blake had made him feel lesser. Even worse was the open secret—the fact that Mrs. Graves and Mr. Blake had still been illicit lovers right up until the moment of his death.

Excerpt from *Death in a Storm* (1818) by T.

Oakley, p. 102.

Reginald sat in the Roberts' room with

Daniel, Laura, and Tabitha. He had been surprised by the enthusiasm that Tabitha had shown about helping him solve the case, but not upset about it in the least. When Daniel returned, Reginald had told his friends of his intentions, and Daniel seemed almost as excited as Tabitha did herself.

“So,” said Laura. “It appears we’re living out one of those murder mysteries which you hold so dear.” She gave her sister a rueful smile. “You didn’t kill him for the drama of it, did you?”

Daniel laughed loudly, patting his wife on the arm, and Tabitha and Reginald both grinned.

Laura blushed, obviously embarrassed by her husband's overwhelmingly positive reaction. "Oh, dear. Perhaps I should not joke about a man's death in such a manner. His body isn't even in the ground yet."

"Pfft. The worms have been feeding on that codger for decades. This just makes it

official,” Daniel said. When Laura shot him a shocked look, Daniel just shrugged. “He wasn’t a good man, Laura.”

“It pains me to admit it, but Daniel is correct,” Reginald told Laura. “The reason there is such fluff and drama and no sorrow is because nobody will mourn his passing in particular. He cheated his business partners, had a terrible reputation with his female servants, and a voracious taste for young women . . .”

“And he was a thief,” Daniel added.

“Laura, my dear, you’re a kind soul, but there was nothing redeemable about Gregory Barton.”

“He was still murdered, though,” Tabitha said thoughtfully. She had her notebook out and was scribbling in it again. Reginald thought she looked very pretty like that; her ink black hair was tied up behind her head as she concentrated on the strokes of her pencil on the paper. “And the sooner we find out why, and by whom, the safer we shall all feel.”

“The problem with that is that everyone here has a motive,” Reginald said, giving Tabitha an approving look before he went on. “Except for the servants, who are all in Grisham’s employ, and you, Tabitha, everyone in the house at the time of Barton’s death had reason to kill him.”

“*Good* reason,” Daniel added pointedly.

Laura shifted uncomfortably in her chair but nodded. “All right,” she said. “So how do

we go about this?”

“Well, first, Reginald, you and Daniel should repeat all you know about the guests’ possible motivations. I shall note them down for future reference,” Tabitha said. “Perhaps we will find something that we have missed.

Reginald beamed at her. “You’re very sharp,” he said, causing her to blush once more. “Yes, that is a good idea. With whom should we begin?”

“Me,” Daniel suggested. Everyone looked at him, and he lifted his shoulders in a shrug. “There’s no pretending I didn’t have a reason to want him dead, nor can we act as though I’m sad that he is gone. To exclude me would be poor investigation.”

“Nobody suspects you, Danny,” Reginald assured him, though secretly he was relieved. He didn’t *really* believe that Daniel had hurt Barton, of course . . . but he also was less aware than he had ever been in his life about what could and what could not be taken for

granted.

He's made several comments wishing for this very thing. And could I blame him if he had?

It troubled Reginald that he didn't have an answer for this. He stayed silent as Tabitha read out loud what she was writing.

“All right,” she said. “The Roberts—
Daniel and Laura. Daniel has known Mr.
Barton his whole life, Laura only for a few
months.”

“Our families have been at war for three generations,” Daniel told her while her pencil flew across the page. “My father’s grandmother and her twin sister were both born on the same piece of land. One married a Barton, the other a Roberts, and then their father died. By right and law, my great-great-grandfather’s land should have gone to his oldest daughter, Mrs. Roberts, and her husband.”

“But, of course, it didn’t happen that

way. *That* Mr. Barton was cold and scheming, and he convinced his wife to lie and hide the birth records of the twins. A little money and a lot of influence made that easy,” Laura continued. Daniel blinked in surprise, obviously unaware that she knew his history so well, and Reginald was pleased to see the joy in his eyes. “Since courts were split on which was the older twin, it became contested land.”

“Barton’s ancestor robbed mine of land and money, and every generation since has

done the same,” Daniel said with a scowl.

“The only good thing about Barton is that none of his bastards will bear his name, nor even know who he is. He died before he could poison the world even more.”

“Which left you as the sole heir to the contested land,” Tabitha concluded. “Which is a stronger motive than many.”

Reginald looked closely at Daniel, suddenly desperate to see how his friend reacted to this. Daniel didn’t even flinch as he

said, “Yes, it does. I could have done it. I would have every reason to do it. But I didn’t.”

I believe him. Thank God.

“He was with me all night,” Laura said. She colored a little and said, “We were . . . getting reacquainted, just as you suggested, Tabby.”

Tabitha smiled at her. “Good. You make a good couple,” she replied. “You know I just

have to record everything.”

Laura nodded. “Then I suppose my motive would be my eagerness to help my husband, who I do care for very much.”

A moment passed between the couple, and when Reginald glanced at them again, he saw that they were holding hands.

Tabitha moved on fairly quickly.

“Reginald?”

“I was alone all night,” Reginald told her truthfully. “Nobody can corroborate my alibi, but I was in my bedroom. Nonetheless, my motive is thus: I inherited Barton as a business partner when I inherited my father’s firm. I was forced to focus on financial law with a man who has been taking money from my pocket, both metaphorically and literally. I intended to buy him out and put Daniel in his place as soon as I had the financial means to do so.”

Tabitha stared at him, her eyes wide.

“That,” she said, “is a good motive.”

Reginald tilted his head. “It is,” he replied. “I would definitely suspect me. Do you?”

The way those eyes bore into his! It was as if she could see his soul. He wanted to see her, too, to know everything about her. He never wanted to look away.

“I don’t know what to believe,” Tabitha replied quietly. “But I can’t deny that you’re a

suspect.”

Reginald nodded. It was true, but it still hurt. And why should she say otherwise? They had only known each other for a few days. He continued to stare at her, but she neither flinched nor looked away. Something passed between them, then, some intangible spark in their gaze that Reginald could not explain. When he finally did turn his eyes from hers, he was briefly overwhelmed with the strangest sensation of loss.

Tabitha audibly swallowed, then went on in a slightly higher pitch. “Lady Alma Wells. She has a strong motive if what Reginald told me is true.”

Daniel nodded. “Yes,” he said seriously. “Barton’s vile business practices had poor Mr. Wells meeting his own temple with the operative end of a pistol. Lady Wells hasn’t been shy about how much she despises him.”

“And she was missing for a few hours last night,” Tabitha admitted. “Right around the

time that Mr. Barton was killed.

Reginald blinked. This was new information, and it changed his perspective on things quite a bit. “She said she never left the room.”

“She lied,” Tabitha said. “I woke up and she wasn’t there.”

They all paused for a few minutes to digest this. Reginald felt especially disturbed. He didn’t particularly *like* Lady Wells—well,

she didn't make herself likeable—but could he believe that the woman was a killer?

And would I fault her if she was?

Disturbed again, Reginald said, “We must consider Mr. Grisham. I don't know that he'd have the stomach for murder, but he's certainly one of our top subjects.”

“He's a useless bilker and a cuckold besides that, but he worshipped the ground on which Barton walked,” Daniel said doubtfully.

“Or he seemed to,” Tabitha noted. “He would not be the first man to act subservient to get close to another whom he wished to murder.”

Reginald thoughtfully tapped his chin. “Apart from myself, Grisham *does* stand to benefit the most from Barton’s death. They undertook many joint ventures. And as for his wife . . . well, I’m fairly certain that, as Daniel said, Barton made a cuckold of Grisham.”

“Which explains Mrs. Grisham’s motive as well,” Laura ventured nervously. “After all, if she was having an affair with the man, the guilt might have driven her mad. She may even have been coerced into it. And if the stories about him and his younger maids are true, one of Mr. Grisham’s servants could have done it as well. Willingly or by force.”

She blushed even more deeply as all eyes turned to her. Tabitha hurried over and hugged her. “That’s brilliant, Lu!” she said enthusiastically. “I wouldn’t have thought of

that.”

Laura looked thrilled, and Reginald had to admit that he was impressed. Whoever Mr. and Mrs. Oakley were, they had produced perhaps the finest pair of daughters that Reginald had ever seen.

“Now, Mrs. Paddington obviously hates Barton. She’s said so several times,” Tabitha said, returning to her notes. “We know that Mr. Paddington was in debt—his motive—but that he has very little nerve. That gives the

wife multiple motives.”

“Indeed,” Reginald agreed. He held up his hand, counting them off on his fingers. “She was clearly worried about her daughter staying here, hence wanting the girl in her suite. She would want to ensure that her husband’s name and debts were cleared. And she held a personal dislike for Barton.”

“Well, who didn’t?” Daniel snorted. “Let’s not count out the daughter entirely, though. She’s a bit dim and cries excessively, but it

doesn't take a strong man to pour poison in a cup. If Barton tried anything on Miss Joanna, or even if she simply wanted to protect her father . . .”

Tabitha nodded. “You’re right, though it pains me to admit it,” she said. “We cannot count out anyone. Not even me, who, as Laura astutely pointed out, could have ghoulishly murdered him for my own amusement and inspiration.”

The comment lightened the mood a bit,

but there was still a heaviness in the room.

Reginald could feel the suspicion creeping up between them, even though none would admit it.

“Let’s not forget that any pair could have been involved, or even a larger group,” Daniel said slowly.

“And there’s one more suspect that we have missed—Barton himself,” Reginald added. Everyone looked at him. “You see, if he found out that he had some illness or the like,

it's very in character for him to poison himself and allow his guests to tear each other apart. That could be the whole reason that he threw the party in the first place.”

“But why! That’s horrible!” Laura exclaimed. Daniel put his arm around her, drawing her close.

“But not impossible,” Tabitha said, noting it down. “I think we should still treat this as a murder while we are performing the investigation—but to say that there is no way

that Barton himself was involved is naïve at best. He could have been a sadistic man who wanted to cause chaos, even till the end.”

Reginald nodded. “Perhaps Tabitha and I can conduct interviews tomorrow while the pair of you investigate the house. Check in the smaller upstairs study on the left to see if you can find any documentation from doctors, lawyers—that sort of thing. Grisham loans it out to Barton whenever he comes here.”

“They’ve got such a strange relationship,”

Daniel snorted. "I'm surprised Grisham doesn't just wear a dog collar and get it over with."

"It is rather odd, but if that's how things are, then that's a capital idea," Tabitha said, and Reginald felt an unexpected lightness at her praise.

"You and Tabitha, eh?" Daniel asked, raising an eyebrow. "Not you and I, who both have experience?"

"I would rather that the women were

accompanied at all times by one of us,”

Reginald retorted. “There’s potentially a killer on the loose.”

Daniel snorted, and Reginald could tell that his friend had seen through the façade. It wasn’t *entirely* a lie—he did prefer that they operated in pairs—but he was fairly certain that the women could take care of themselves, especially Tabitha.

Admit it, Reginald. You just want to be close to her.

It was ridiculous, he knew, to be thinking of romance at a time like this. And yet, he could not help how drawn he was to her. It felt as though this—all of this, the good, the bad, and the downright horrific—had conspired just so that they could meet.

“I agree with Reginald,” Tabitha said. “I have read plenty of investigative scenes to know that being in pairs gives us a fighting chance. Besides, if I am to gather material for my book, I will need to be a part of the

action.”

“I would suggest you not let your imagination and desire to write a riveting story get in the way of solving this issue and being safe. I am unsurprised that you agree with Reginald, though I doubt that your reasons have much to do with it,” Laura teased.

“Oh, *now* you two learn to think synchronically,” Tabitha replied, sticking out her tongue in a playful manner.

They all laughed, but soon the reality of the situation returned to them once more.

“Until such time as the investigation is completed, I suggest we swap rooms,” Laura said, with a slight regretful glance at her husband. “I do not want my sister sharing a bedroom with one of the primary suspects. Daniel, you and Reginald can stay together in the twin room, and my sister and I will share.”

They all agreed to that. “In fact, I am

exhausted,” Tabitha said. “Shall we retire now? Everyone else is in bed already, it seems, so now is as good a time as ever to get some sleep.”

Reginald nodded in agreement. “Very good. Tomorrow, the investigation begins.”

“You two focus on the party guests,” Daniel said, nodding at Reginald. “Like you said, Laura and I will do a sweep of the manor, and we’ll also have a chat with the servants. Like Tabitha said, it’s unlikely that

any of them are involved—but if nothing else, someone must reassure them. No doubt they're terrified."

Laura gave her husband a glowing look.

"You're very kind, my love," she said.

To Reginald's amusement, it was Daniel's turn to blush now. The other man pulled at his collar a little and coughed awkwardly.

"Well," Daniel said. "Reg, I think it's time we left the ladies alone for the night."

“I agree,” Reginald said, getting to his feet. “Would you like an escort to collect your things from your room, Tabitha?”

She shook her head. “No. I do not want to face Lady Wells tonight—and besides, I am exhausted.”

Laura and Daniel hurried into the adjoining room to fetch some of his things. Reginald and Tabitha were left alone, and a strangely comfortable silence wrapped around

them.

“How do you feel?” Reginald asked her after a while.

“Scared. Nervous,” Tabitha told him. She paused, then shrugged. “And excited, too. You must think me quite the bloodthirsty goblin.”

Reginald laughed a full laugh at that. Something about her seemed to alleviate his mood, no matter the situation around them. He took one of her hands between his. “By

definition, a goblin is a hideous, mischievous creature. You may be one of those, but a woman as lovely as yourself could never qualify.”

She stared at him wordlessly for a moment. Daniel and Laura came back before she could say anything, and Daniel patted Reginald on the back.

“Ready to go?” Daniel asked.

“I am,” Reginald said. “Goodnight, Laura.

Sleep well, Tabitha.”

Before he could overthink it, he bent down and gave the back of her hand a courtly kiss. Then he and Daniel left the room.

Uncharacteristically, Daniel said nothing about what had just happened, but the feeling of Tabitha’s soft skin against his lips drove almost everything else from Reginald’s mind.

He could feel her stare following him long after the door closed at their backs.

Chapter 8

Vir et Uxor

Of course, the clever Mrs. Jill Payne was still at the forefront of the investigations. She had explicitly stated on numerous occasions how she wished that Blake would simply die, and it seemed very convenient to Miss Willoughby that the victim would just happen to comply during the party—especially as it would finally relieve the Paynes from their otherwise insurmountable debts.

Excerpt from *Death in a Storm* (1818) by T.

Oakley, p. 105.

Mr. Grisham was the first person that

Tabitha and Reginald targeted for an interview at daybreak. According to Reginald, Grisham was the most likely of all of their suspects, and Tabitha had to admit that he had a point. After all, the man's supposed best friend now lay dead, and all Grisham could muster was a slight expression of discomfort.

Mrs. Grisham insisted upon sitting in on the interview. Reginald initially disagreed, but Tabitha persuaded him that it may be beneficial to interview them together, at least initially. It would help to understand more

directly the dynamic between this strange couple—and, perhaps, help confirm or dismiss some of their more insidious speculations.

“So, Mr. Grisham, I suppose I shall start with the most basic question,” Reginald said. They had commandeered Mr. Grisham’s personal study, and Tabitha sat with him behind the desk. She was taking diligent notes, wanting to capture every second of this.

On the other end of the desk, Mr. Grisham and his wife sat in such a way that

Tabitha was forcefully reminded of a schoolboy whose parents had been called to the headmaster to answer for his wrongdoing.

I must stop thinking about it, or else I shall laugh. But I cannot see anything else when I gaze upon them!

“What would that be?” Mr. Grisham demanded, bristling.

“Were you the last person to see Mr. Barton before everyone retired for the night?”

“I suppose so. We had a few drinks and discussed some things before I left for bed. He was saying that he needed to tend to something in his room and retired to bed earlier. I assumed he was working on something personal, but I don’t pry on my guests. But he didn’t seem to be in a lot of distress though,” Mr. Grisham said as he stared at Reginald with his arms folded over his chest. His stoic expression was steadily slipping into anger and annoyance.

“Did you do it? Did you kill Mr. Barton?

You could have easily slipped something in his drink and waited for it to take effect before heading to your room. After all, this is your place of residence and you had access to your drinks before your guests arrived,” Reginald said calmly. Tabitha felt her heart speed at the smooth calmness in his voice. He sounded exactly like she’d always imagined the heroes in the stories she enjoyed so much—cool, collected, ready for anything. Perhaps he had a hidden secret deep inside him. Perhaps . . .

“No!” Grisham said angrily. “He was my best friend!”

“And he and your wife were . . .”
prompted Reginald.

“Also friends,” Grisham growled.

Reginald raised an artful eyebrow. “So then, you had *no* reason to perhaps want Grisham out of the way? No financial motives, no suspicion of cuckoldry . . .”

“How dare you!” Grisham was turning an odd shade of purple now. “How dare you make such accusations in my house! How could you say such a thing about a dear friend and my wife!”

Tabitha glanced at Mrs. Grisham while Mr. Grisham continued ranting. Unlike her usual spiteful nature, the woman had gone very pale and quiet, and it wasn’t hard to understand why. The argument between Reginald and Mr. Grisham raged back and forth, with the former staying level-toned, and

the latter getting more and more furious.

Tabitha leaned forward. “Mrs. Grisham?”

The woman looked up at her. Behind her usually-cruel eyes, Tabitha saw it—a hint of uncertainty. A hint of desperation.

“I am a gentleman, sir, and your superior and elder,” Mr. Grisham continued further in his ranting. “Who do you think you are to come into this place and start slinging such awful accusations? I am a man of *society*. I am

friends with members of the *High Court*. I could have you thrown in prison for this defamation—this slander. Who—"

"Mrs. Grisham, were you still in love with Mr. Barton?" Tabitha asked softly.

Mrs. Grisham's lip quivered until she burst into tears.

Everyone in the room froze in shock, even Tabitha, who had definitely *not* expected such a response from her words.

“In love with him? I loved Gregory since I was fourteen years old!” Mrs. Grisham sobbed hysterically. “I adored him! He had my heart, yet he refused me time and time again. And even so, I would willingly return to his bed.”

“Leona!” Mr. Grisham said, aghast. “You promised that that was all over once we were married. Surely you were not carrying on behind my back!”

Mrs. Grisham said nothing for a moment, not looking at her husband. Then she cried harder in the handkerchief she had pulled out.

“So, there was an affair,” Reginald said dispassionately. “And perhaps Mr. Barton was filled with guilt. Perhaps he was finally going to tell his friend the truth, and you put an end to it.”

“No!” gasped a pale Mrs. Grisham. “No! You must believe me. I married Basil because he was kind to me, and because Scott needed a

father, but *Gregory* had my heart. I would have sooner died than harmed him!”

A stunned quiet followed her words.

Tabitha awkwardly cleared her throat. “Scott is . . . your son?”

Both Grishams ignored her, but Reginald gave her a little nod of confirmation.

Mr. Grisham looked simply confused.

“But we didn’t . . . Scott wasn’t conceived until *after* our wedding, Leona. You’re

misremembering.”

Oh, God above!

He seemed to realize the implication at the same time as Tabitha did. “Leona,” he said. “Tell me that I misunderstand you. Tell me that Scott is my son.”

Mrs. Grisham shook her head miserably. “I didn’t know what to do. Gregory wouldn’t acknowledge the boy as I carried him in my womb, but I loved him so much. I couldn’t

bear to get rid of him. I didn't know how to tell you . . .”

Mr. Grisham stared at her in true horror.

“Now, that's a motive if I ever heard one,” Reginald said quietly. “So, I ask you again, Mr. Grisham—did you kill Mr. Barton?”

“No,” the man said in a voice as cold and harsh as the darkest winter ice. “I did not. But damn it, I wish that I had.”

Reginald raised an eyebrow, but Tabitha shook her head. “If Mr. Grisham thought that Scott was his son and didn’t know the affair had continued until now, then there was no reason for murder,” she said.

“He didn’t know,” Mrs. Grisham wept. “Nobody knew. Gregory promised he’d take the secret to his grave.”

“It seems like he did,” spat Mr. Grisham.

“I think,” Tabitha said, putting a gentle

hand on Reginald's arm, "that we should perhaps step outside for a few moments and allow Mr. and Mrs. Grisham to compose themselves.

Reginald met her eyes and, to Tabitha's relief, he nodded. The two of them headed out of the room, closing the door behind them just as the yelling started.

"We women avoided Mr. Barton, and he

avoided us,” the cook told Laura as she and Daniel sat in the kitchen eating the bowls of soup that the older woman had pressed upon them. “He didn’t have time for the likes of us.”

“Not once we passed five-and-twenty, anyway!” the older maid said with a dark cackle. She was around thirty, and her name was Lucy. “He stopped bothering us a few years back when Master Grisham told him to stop robbing him of his servants.”

Laura and Daniel exchanged

uncomfortable glances. Laura didn't particularly want to believe that the dead man had been such a swine as all of this, but it was growing increasingly hard to ignore. There were seven servants in Grisham's employ in total—the cook, the head housekeeper, a gardener, a driver, a man who served as a butler and messenger, and two maids. All seven were gathered in the kitchen now, answering Laura and Daniel's questions with more eagerness than she had ever expected.

“I've known Barton for twenty years,” the

driver told them. “I used to work under him, in fact, before I accepted employment here instead. Terrible temper. Nobody liked him.”

“He had a reputation with the maids, as the women imply,” the butler agreed. “Once the servants realized what was going on, many of them fled to other employment.”

“It’s no surprise that he’s dead,” the head housekeeper added. She was a woman in her late thirties named Catherine, and Laura already liked her no-nonsense approach

immensely. “He poisoned everything he touched. Even his friends hated him. Mr. Grisham included.”

“Mr. Grisham wasn’t actually fond of his so-called friend?” Daniel asked, raising an eyebrow. “How could you possibly know such a thing for sure?”

Catherine snorted. “You people upstairs, you think we’re unaware of all your society scandals—but we know. We hear everything. Barton was vile, and everyone thought so. I

had a sister that worked for him once.”

“What happened to your sister?” Daniel asked. “Did she find employment elsewhere?”

Catherine’s lips tightened. “She died,” she replied. “Like so many pretty young things did under that man. I’d have left the service entirely if my family didn’t need the money.”

Laura frowned. “How did she—”

“He ruined her,” Catherine explained.

“She was set to marry a fine man, you know. She’d be released from service. Have a family. She was only eighteen then—three years younger than I was—and he claimed she *owed* him before she left. No was never an option for the poor lass. She left his employment in disgrace shortly after and I never heard from her again until her funeral.”

Laura hesitated, then took the housekeeper’s hand. “I’m very sorry,” she said. “I can’t imagine losing Tabitha in such a terrible way.”

It felt strange to be crossing the class boundary so freely—and yet, right now, they were not a gentlewoman and a servant, but two older sisters, united by love for their younger sibling.

“How long ago was this?” Daniel asked.

Catherine wiped a tear from her eye, then shrugged. “Fifteen, twenty years ago? Somewhere between those times, I’d guess, though she died much more recently. My

Caroline wasn't the first girl he spoiled, and she wasn't the last, either. It was an open secret between your types, of course, but *we* tried to do our best to keep young women from accepting jobs there after that."

"It's horrible," Laura said, feeling tears in her own eyes. "Daniel, did anyone know about this?"

Daniel shifted uncomfortably. "There have always been rumors about Barton," he said. "But nobody would ever follow them up.

The fellow simply had too much money.”

“And it was just *servant* girls,” the cook added caustically.

The final maid—the young girl who had escorted Tabitha to fetch the constable—finally spoke up. “Why do you ask?” she said quietly. She looked pale and drawn; all this talk of death seemed to be getting to her. “Are we suspects?”

“Your name is Alice, isn’t it?” Laura

asked kindly. The girl nodded.

“Well, Alice,” Daniel said. Laura was surprised and pleased to hear how gently he spoke. “None of you were actually in Mr. Barton’s employ, but it would be remiss of us not to question everyone in the house. Besides, a general understanding of his character might be imperative to understanding why one of his so-called friends murdered him—and who better to give us one than the servants, who see all?”

All of the servants looked mollified at his words, and Laura remembered how he had won her heart in the first place. It had been at a ball which Laura had planned to not even attend, and had only gone due to the insistence of both Tabitha and a friend.

I was standing by the drinking fountain when he approached me. He said that he almost lost his nerve about speaking with me, but if he lived on forever without a dance with a vision like me, he would die unfulfilled.

After the dance, Laura told Tabitha about the words, and Tabitha had encouraged her to spend as much time with Daniel as possible. So in love and ecstatic had the couple been that, when the time came to part one night, they decided to marry so that they would never have to.

They left the servant's quarters to start their search, and Laura said, "You are a kind man, Danny."

"Danny?" he asked, arching an eyebrow

as they climbed the stairs. “You’ve never called me that before.”

Laura blushed. “I . . . well, if you do not like it, I will not do it again. It’s just, I had heard how Reginald often calls you such, and I wanted to try it out. It was silly, I—”

Suddenly, Daniel took her face between his hands and pressed his lips to her own. It was a short kiss, yet one that was filled with more passion than any since their wedding day.

“I love it,” he said. “I love you. I’m sorry that I forgot how to do that for a while.”

Laura laughed in surprise and in joy.

“And I love you! My darling, how silly we’ve been,” she said, wrapping her arms around him.

They embraced like that for a time, just enjoying each other’s company and temporarily forgetting everything else.

I see how Tabitha looks at Reginald already.

*Perhaps soon enough my sister will experience
this happiness, too. I pray to God she does!*

Eventually, they pulled apart and Daniel cleared his throat. “All right,” he said. “We have a job to do.”

Laura nodded, assuming a serious expression. “You’re right,” she said. The dissonance of what had just happened and the context of everything around her was striking. “Let’s go and solve a murder.”

The tension in the room when Tabitha and Reginald re-entered was so palpable that the air felt like treacle. Mrs. Grisham was no longer crying, though her eyes were still red and her usually pristine hair mussed, while Mr. Grisham's face was still an emotional recreation of the darkest of the storm clouds outside. The two of them had moved as far apart as physically possible while remaining in the same room.

“Erm, Mrs. Grisham?” Tabitha asked tentatively after ten or so minutes had passed where nobody said anything. “Are you . . . ready to talk?”

“Talk!” Mrs. Grisham repeated. “What is there to talk about, girl? I have lost a man who held my heart for more than half of my life. I will now lose my husband and when the secret gets out, I will lose my son, too—my poor Scott will lose everything!”

“What in the blazes are you talking about, you madwoman?” Mr. Grisham demanded. “You cuckolded me and now you intend to make it public? I will not grant you a separation nor a divorce, do you understand me?”

Mrs. Grisham blinked. “You do not want to put me aside?”

“I am a *gentleman*,” Mr. Grisham blazed. “I will *not* be shamed in this way. I will not let my son witness me turning his mother away,

nor will I risk my own name in society.”

“But he’s not your—” Reginald started to observe.

“Bah!” Mr. Grisham interrupted. “I have paid for him his whole life. He bears my name. I was wed to his mother when he was born. Barton took everything from me in my life. My wife’s love. My business decisions. My renown. He can die a thousand times before he takes my son from me, too.”

“Basil . . .” Mrs. Grisham said quietly.

“You mean this?”

“You’re still my wife, Leona. It’s time that you started acting like it.” Mr. Grisham said.

He turned to Reginald and said, “Now, Mr.

Hatcher, I understand why I am a suspect—and why my wife may be one as well. I

understand that I have given you no reason to

like me as a person or to trust my word. But I

assure you that I did *not* kill Barton. And if I

did, I think I would prefer to brag about it

than to hide it.”

Tabitha held her breath for a few seconds, waiting to see how Reginald would respond. Slowly but deliberately, the younger man nodded.

“Neither one of you can be cleared from the suspect list quite yet,” Reginald said slowly. “You both have your reasons to have wanted Barton out of the way, regardless of what you say. However, I think we have enough to go on now that we shall move on. If either of you recall anything at all which

might be of use to the investigation . . .”

“We’ll tell you,” Mr. Grisham said stiffly.

“Now, I must insist that you *leave*.”

Reginald nodded and gestured to Tabitha. She got to her feet and hurried to his side, and together the two of them left the room and the Grishams behind.

They walked along the corridor quietly for a little, each lost in their own thoughts.

Eventually, Tabitha said, “You know, Alice—the maid—she told me that Mr. Grisham was not as bad a man as his association with Barton made him seem. After the way he handled the news about Scott in there, I begin to think that she might have had a point.”

Reginald nodded, but he looked troubled. “The more we discover, the more I worry, Tabitha,” he said. “I knew that Daniel and I had reason to despise Barton, but it seems that *nobody* had any time for him. Every question

we ask seems to create more motive for every one of our subjects.”

Tabitha nodded. She looked up at him—at the sharp angles of his face, at the thoughtful little crease in his brow—and despite the situation, she couldn’t help but smile. “Thank you for letting me accompany you,” she said. “I know it is quite unusual.”

“I think that ‘letting’ is a little strong,” Reginald teased. “Would I have been able to stop you?”

Tabitha didn't answer.

“Regardless, your help—whether you realize it or not—was invaluable,” Reginald continued. “I know that many consider me quite good at charming people, but you have a way of speaking that can open even the most locked hearts. We make a good team.”

Tabitha practically felt herself glowing from the praise.

*This is ridiculous. Get a hold of yourself,
Tabitha! No man has ever had such an effect on
you!*

“I agree,” she said out loud. She wasn’t as prone to blushing as her sister, and she had never been as thankful for that fact as she was at this exact moment. “I am glad to have befriended you, Reginald.”

He smiled at her. “And I you. So, what comes next? Who should we question?”

“Lady Wells,” Tabitha said instantly.

“There was something . . . off about her disappearance last night. I don’t know how to explain it, but it definitely merits further investigation.”

“Not to mention how belligerently she has been behaving today,” Reginald replied with a thoughtful nod. “All right, then. Lady Wells it is. Do you want to take a break, or shall we go to confront her now?”

Tabitha grimaced a little. She wasn’t

exactly intimidated by the older woman, but she did not relish the idea of extended time with her, either. “Let us just get it over with,” she said.

Reginald seemed to understand. He gave her one more brief smile, and together they walked off to question the next person who might have been a murderer.

Chapter 9

Scandalum Magnatum

Mr. Sharpe knew that when the time came, any confrontation which he undertook could take a turn for the unpleasant. The problem with poison is that it is ubiquitous throughout history as a subtle art; it is the tool of a killer who would not be discovered. If Sharpe, Miss Willoughby, and the Redfords were not careful, Mr. Sharpe worried that his next meal may be the next weapon used to kill.

Excerpt from *Death in a Storm* (1818) by T.

Oakley, p. 122.

Lady Wells was surprisingly pleased to see them. She opened the door to the room that she'd shared with Tabitha upon the first knock, nodded, and said, "Well, come in. I don't have all day."

Reginald and Tabitha looked at each other in minor confusion before Tabitha shrugged and gave a little nod. Reginald pushed open the door and walked inside to see a flurry of activity. The bed which he presumed had once belonged to Tabitha was now piled high with Lady Wells' things, and

she was slowly stuffing everything she had into her trunk.

“What . . . are you doing?” Tabitha asked.

“Hm,” Lady Wells tutted. “I *had* thought they would send some of the servants to help me move, but I suppose you two work just as well. Come, come, I haven’t got all day.”

“Move where?” Reginald asked. He closed the door to the room behind them with

a soft click, and casually leaned back against it as he faced Lady Wells. “We can’t go anywhere.”

“Well, I am the primary ranking member of the household. I shall not be confined to this tiny bed and drab little room so long as there’s a perfectly functional master bedroom free to occupy,” Lady Wells replied. The older woman straightened up and frowned. “You *are* here to help me, aren’t you?”

Tabitha looked aghast. “Mr. Barton just

died and all you can focus on is taking his room?”

Lady Wells turned her gaze to the younger woman. “My dear Miss Oaken, are we still to continue the charade that anyone *cares*? We must catch the murderer, of course, but I do not see how me becoming more comfortable will hinder that.”

“Her name is Miss Oakley,” Reginald corrected, gaining one gratified smile and one raised eyebrow for his efforts. “And I’m afraid

the authorities care very much who was responsible for Mr. Barton's death. I'm here on their behalf—both of us are—as you know, and I'd appreciate it if you'd sit and allow us to ask you a few questions.”

Lady Wells narrowed her eyes. “This is preposterous.”

“It won't take long,” Reginald insisted.

“Please, sit.”

“Do you know who I am?” she

demanded. “My father was a baron. I am an important woman, not some lowly farm wife that may be ordered around!”

“Sit,” Tabitha said, so sharply that Reginald stared at her in surprise. “Now. Gentry or peasant, rich or poor, a man is dead, and *you* will not impede the investigation further. Stop wasting all of our time and *listen to Reginald*, Lady Wells. It will be over quicker that way. Unless you really *do* have something to hide.”

There was a pause, then Lady Wells—her chin held high—walked over to a chair and sat primly in it. “You cannot possibly think that I am involved here. If I was to kill Barton, I’d do so in a much more dignified manner. You cannot harass me like this.”

“May I just get my questions done and make this easier for all of us, then?” asked Reginald tiredly.

Lady Wells huffed, but nodded. “Go on then,” she said.

“Can you tell us—” Reginald started, but he was interrupted as Lady Wells let out a loud tut.

“Heavens, boy, is that how you ask a question? How do you expect to get any answers if you cannot be forceful?” Lady Wells demanded. “Honestly. Try again. Better this time.”

Reginald blinked. “All . . . right. Er, Lady Wells—”

“No!” she chided. “No ‘er’. You are not an infant who does not yet know how to speak, are you? If so, then please, I would prefer to be questioned by an adult.”

Reginald stared at her with true incredulity. “Look, I just want to know—”

“You *want*? Well, why didn’t you say so! Let’s all sacrifice our time and energy just because Mr. Hatcher *wants* something,” Lady Wells said with a derisive sniff.

He opened his mouth again, trying not to give in to the frustration, but Tabitha spoke before he could even form another sentence.

“That’s more than enough of that, my lady,” Tabitha said, firmly but politely. “We are all aware of your rank and title. We are also aware that you were missing from this room last night when Mr. Barton was murdered. Tell us now, where did you go?”

The older woman looked scandalized by

the question. “How rude!” she proclaimed.

“Did your father never teach you any sort of politeness? A lady needs her privacy.”

“A man is dead, Alma,” Tabitha replied.

The use of her first name seemed to stun the lady into silence, and she just gaped. Reginald stared too—he had never seen this side of Tabitha before. She was not blazing with fury, but rather giving off a cold, certain aura, as though she was the queen of winter itself.

“None of us have privacy anymore. Did you go to Mr. Barton or did you not?”

“I—” Lady Wells started. “I—”

“The *truth*, please,” Tabitha insisted.

To Reginald’s eternal surprise, the lady let out a large sigh and threw her hands in the air. “Oh, very *well*,” she said. “If you *must* know, then yes, I did go to Barton. I made my way into his bedroom, as he requested of me. He was quite vigorous still when I left him, in fact.”

Tabitha gasped. “You . . . Lady Wells, are you telling me that you were romantically involved with Mr. Barton?”

Lady Wells sniffed. “Please. There was nothing *romantic* about any of it. Quite frankly, I don’t know what Grisham’s wife saw in that man. Barton was an animal and that was the quickest way to get myself closer to him. I would never remarry, not at my age, and especially not to an untitled man such as him.”

Reginald saw Tabitha looking terribly embarrassed by what Lady Wells was implying, and no wonder—if that scandal had gotten out into the world, it would be all that anyone could talk about for years. However, he was more focused on something else that she'd said beyond the admittance.

“My lady, what exactly was the purpose of you getting closer to Mr. Barton?” he asked.

The woman went still. “I . . . what do you mean?” she asked, a little too innocently.

She's hiding something. Something big.

“You said you wanted to get closer to him, which is why you began your . . . physical dalliance. What reason would you have for that?” Reginald pushed. “We know what happened to your husband . . .”

“Do not talk about my husband,” Lady Wells commanded sharply.

“He killed himself, didn’t he?” Tabitha

asked quietly. "Because of Mr. Barton and his illegitimate business practices. It must have been awful for you. I'm so sorry."

Lady Wells' eyes widened in horror. "You . . . you . . . does everyone know?" she demanded. "Does everyone say that my husband committed such a dreadful sin?!"

Reginald shook his head. "We weren't even sure that we were correct until you confirmed it just now," he replied.

“I do not want my husband’s name dragged through the mud,” Lady Wells told them angrily. “Whatever you *think* that you know—”

“Calm yourself,” Reginald told her. “We won’t tell anyone. I simply wish to know—where is the connection? Why would you begin a dalliance with a man whom you held responsible for the death of your husband?”

Lady Wells’ eyes narrowed. “Are you sure that you want to know?”

“Tell us,” Tabitha said. “Please.”

“Very well, girl,” Lady Wells replied. “Go and look in the little compartment in the front of my trunk and tell me what you find there.”

Tabitha looked at Reginald uncertainly. He hesitated, but then nodded, hoping he wasn’t making a terrible mistake. Tabitha headed over to the trunk slowly, as if she was afraid it might bite, then followed Lady Wells’ instructions to pop open the compartment. A

drawer slid from the trunk, and inside it was .

..

“This is . . . a dagger,” Tabitha
whispered.

Reginald stared at the old-fashioned
weapon gleaming in Tabitha’s hand. “Why in
the world are you carrying around a weapon
like that?” he asked, though of course as soon
as he asked the question, he felt he knew the
answer.

“That dagger, my young friends, belonged to my father, who inherited it from his father,” Lady Wells said. “I am a woman of class, and I have little idea how to operate those flintlock pistols that you men favor so greatly. However, a sharp weapon to the throat will do the job just as well.”

“You were getting close to Mr. Barton in order to kill him,” Tabitha concluded. “You wanted to take his life like he took your husband’s.”

“Yes, I did, until some wicked opportunist stole my chance,” Lady Wells said in a voice so eerily calm that it made Reginald shiver. “Poison! What a remarkably unexciting way to end a monster as vile as that man was.”

Reginald and Tabitha met each other’s gazes, and Reginald had the feeling that Tabitha was at just as much of a loss about what to do or say next as he was. “Well,” he said uncertainly. “I suppose the intent to murder is not in itself a crime . . .”

“Precisely,” Lady Wells replied.

“Though it hardly casts a wonderful light upon your person, my lady,” Tabitha added.

“With all the respect that is due, if news of this got out, then your reputation and your standing would be ruined forever.”

“Of this I am more than aware,” Lady Wells said. “Why, then, my dear amateur detectives, do you think that I would admit it so freely?”

“Because,” Tabitha said, “you value your reputation above all else.”

“And your willingness to risk it is fairly solid proof that you were not actively involved in Mr. Barton’s death,” Reginald realized.

“Very clever. And very risky. How do you know we will not go out and tell everyone what we have learned?”

“I am not concerned about that,” Lady Wells replied. “It’s debatable to what extent

you would be believed. And even if you were, well, I am old and widowed.” A look of brief, genuine sadness crossed her face. “I do not matter. The scandal would pass sooner than it started.”

Reginald didn't respond.

“We shan't tell your secret, Lady Wells,” Tabitha said quietly. “In exchange, however, you will aid us with this investigation. Any word you hear, any suspicious movements which you might remember—you will report

everything to us immediately. Are we agreed?”

Lady Wells tilted her head. “You are a spirited one, girl. Much more than I initially gave you credit for upon our first meeting. Very well, Miss Oakley, I accept your conditions.”

Tabitha wore a strange half smile as she nodded. “I’m glad to hear it,” she said.

“Reginald, do you have anything else to ask?”

“I don’t,” he said, though in truth, his mind was alight with questions. “Lady Wells, we may have to return to interview you at some other point. I assume that you are agreeable to this.”

“Of course. Whatever you need,” Lady Wells said. “After all, though we may be working at cross purposes in regards to the victim, I feel that we both have the same vested interest in discovering who managed to successfully rid him from the world.”

Reginald opened his mouth and then closed it again, deciding against airing his own opinions about the dead man. “Thank you,” he said instead. “Tabitha? Shall we leave Lady Wells to her packing?”

“Let’s,” Tabitha replied. The two of them nodded once to the Lady, and then they walked out of the room together.

Tabitha wore a distant expression as they walked through the corridors, and Reginald could hardly blame her. His own head was

practically about to burst. How was it, he wondered, that every time he found an answer, it only brought a thousand more questions?

“He was planning to travel,” Daniel said, flashing the tickets he just found in Laura’s direction. “With someone. There are two tickets here for the *HMS Liberty*, leaving dock in three days. Do you think it had anything to do with the killing?”

“The *Liberty*?” Laura asked. “Where was she headed?”

“To the West Indies, it seems,” Daniel replied, eyeing the tickets. “I wonder if Barton was involved in human trade on top of his other business endeavors.”

“Slavery, you mean?” Laura asked. Daniel nodded, and saw a look of disgust on his wife’s face. “Good God. We and our American cousins must put an end to this

practice once and for all. Even with the king signing into law the abolishment of slavery, there are still those who continue this practice outside the country. Do you *truly* think that Mr. Barton was involved in it?”

“Why not? He saw everyone as chattel for his financial gain, no matter where they come from. And as you said, it is still a legal trade outside the country. Barton was only interested in profit, never in cost,” Daniel replied. He placed the tickets back in the drawer, feeling as though his hands had been

dirtied by them. “I wonder for whom the second ticket was purchased?”

“Perhaps someone who was here at the party,” Laura guessed. “Mrs. Grisham, perhaps? Did you not tell me that you suspected them of an affair?”

“I did,” Daniel said. “But this is Grisham’s house, even if the study was reserved for Barton. Don’t you think it would be a little bold to keep the tickets here?”

“Unless it was a deliberate snub. A way to show Grisham how little he actually cared,” Laura suggested.

“Hm,” Daniel replied. “Could be. Though I don’t imagine that Barton would be willing to give up his access to young women and his business just to run off with her. More likely the second ticket was for Mr. Grisham and the two were going off to buy some people together like a person would buy a herd of cows.”

Laura shuddered, and Daniel put his arm around her as she approached. To his delight, she leaned into his touch. “How dark this has all become,” she sighed, resting her head on his shoulder. “Slavery. Murder. Illicit affairs. My God, and I brought my younger sister into all of it!”

Daniel chuckled. “I would not worry about Tabitha,” he said. “She seems to be thriving in this conflict, especially with Reg by her side. The two of them have taken to one another quite well, don’t you think?”

“You think that they are thinking of romance *now*?” Laura asked him, obviously disbelieving.

“And why not?” Daniel asked. “What is more affirming of love and life than the horrific specter of death? Laura, in the last couple of days, I have remembered why I love you more than our stale country life ever allowed. It may seem maudlin to find our happiness in another man’s tragedy, but I cannot find it within myself to feel guilt. Why

should I, when God clearly intended for us to be together? What if all of this was just a reminder of that?”

Laura blinked up at him. “Do you truly believe that?” she asked skeptically.

“No,” he admitted. “At least, not the last part. But it makes for a nice speech, does it not?”

Laura laughed. “That it does,” she agreed. “And who knows? You might yet be

correct. We *have* been awkward around one another, and this man's death, tragic though it was, seems to have brought us back together."

"I'm not sure I would call Barton's death *tragic*," Daniel said, knowing that she would be disapproving. "Do not look so upset. He was a monster."

"No man is more a monster than he who tries to control life itself," Laura replied.

Daniel frowned, and she smiled. "It's something that Tabitha likes to say when we

speak of Mrs. Shelley's book. I'm not sure quite how, but it feels like it applies here.”

Just then, the door to Barton's bedroom opened, and Laura cried out in surprise. Daniel instinctively placed himself in front of her, only relaxing when he saw that it was a maid and Lady Wells, not a vengeful ghost, who had found them sneaking through his things.

“Here to rob a corpse, are you?” Lady Wells asked sardonically. She dragged a trunk behind her and pulled it right into the middle

of the room as though it was the most normal thing in the world. The maid in question brought in her other belongings. “By all means, do not stop on my account.”

“Pardon me,” the maid said to the two of them as she continued her work around them. Laura recognized her as Alice, the maid that went with Tabitha to get the authorities.

Daniel quickly hid the *Liberty* tickets in his pocket. “Why are you here?” he asked.

“Why are *you* here?” the lady countered.

“Your friend and your sister-in-law have already questioned me quite thoroughly. If it is gossip you are after, I suggest you go and find them.”

Daniel and Laura looked at each other, then Laura nodded. Daniel took that as confirmation that they should just leave, and he and Laura walked together out of the room, the *Liberty* tickets safely tucked into his pocket. They passed Alice, who gave them an awkward smile and nod before they exited the

door.

When they'd left the older woman in the room and had closed the door behind them, Laura turned to Daniel and asked, "What was *that* all about?"

"I have no idea," he admitted. "But I think that perhaps there were even more layers to the old devil's life than we originally supposed."

"That's saying quite a bit, considering

how many layers you already suspected,”

Laura told him. She slipped her hand through his arm, and Daniel ventured to take her hand. Laura’s fingers threaded naturally with his, and Daniel felt a sense of relief and wonder.

I’m married to this wonderful woman. How did that happen?

“We should go and find the others,”

Laura said. “From what Lady Wells said, I think Tabby and Reginald might have quite a lot to talk about.”

“With what Lady Wells said, I think we might as well,” Daniel answered with a slight smile.

The two of them headed to the dining room while Daniel pondered the events of the last few days. He’d lost his worst rival, he’d probably gained a partnership in the business, and he’d renewed his love with his wife.

Is it moral to glean such rewards from another man’s death? I suppose I shall have to

ask next time I go to church.

On second thought, given everything,
perhaps this one he would keep between
himself and God.

Chapter 10

Novus Actus Interveniens

Of one thing, Miss Willoughby was entirely certain. She was more deeply entrenched in this new world than she had ever been in her old one—and she was not sure if there would ever be a way to return to normal. Nor, in fact, was she sure if she would ever wish to. The problem, if Miss Willoughby was open with herself, lay in Mr. Sharpe. She did not want to return to a sphere without him in it.

Excerpt from *Death in a Storm* (1818) by T.

Oakley, p. 142.

The group of four gathered in the room which now belonged to Tabitha and Laura, where they took their dinner together. Though the rest of the household was eating in the dining room as though everything was usual, Tabitha had not been able to stomach the idea. Besides, she did not particularly want to spend any more time around the potential subjects than she had to.

“ . . . and then we headed directly here,” Daniel said, finishing the report which he and Laura had just given on their conversations

with the servants and the subsequent exploration of the house. “I assume from her commentary that you had a . . . fruitful conversation with Lady Wells?”

“That’s one word for it,” Reginald said dryly. He began to speak, with Tabitha occasionally adding a thought or comment of her own, telling them how the conversations with Lady Wells and the Grishams had gone.

Tabitha had to admit that her sister and brother-in-law made for a fabulous audience.

They gasped in all of the right places, looking thunderstruck at each reveal. It truly gave Tabitha hope that her book, when she finished it, would be a resounding success—if only she could solve the mystery of who was the true culprit in the ending.

How can you think about this? The man is dead!

And yet, the more she learned about Mr. Barton, the less it seemed as though a real person had been killed. He seemed more like a

villain from a puppet show in how he had touched and infected every single one of his guest's lives.

“I think,” Laura said thoughtfully, “that there are just too many variables. I’m not sure entirely how we are supposed to narrow everything down. We’ve now interviewed almost all of the suspects available except for the Paddingtons, and I feel our pool of possibilities has just gotten deeper. Everyone has motive, even some of the servants.”

Daniel nodded, casually putting an arm around his wife's shoulder. "And the tickets we found in his room. There is no explanation for them."

Tabitha was both surprised and pleased to see how Laura automatically moved closer, snuggling into Daniel's side. Clearly, the experience was bringing them close together once more.

Hopefully it sticks this time.

“You’re right,” Tabitha said. “Nothing makes sense at the moment. But I have an idea. I think that we have been coming at this from the wrong angle. Before we do anything else, I think that the main thing that we need to understand is *why* Mr. Barton threw this party in the first place.”

Everyone looked at her. Reginald said, “What do you mean?”

“Well, he had many lackeys in business, and yet the ones he chose to invite—other

than Grisham—were all people who had some grudge or the other against him,” Tabitha explained. “The season ended weeks ago, yet he waited until now to throw this event. He never got the chance to explain to us why we were all here. Now that we have the tickets for the ship, we can be fairly certain that he intended to leave—so who was to accompany him, and what was his purpose in inviting you all here?”

Daniel tapped his chin. “Perhaps just for the drama of it. He enjoyed stirring up

trouble. Maybe he even meant to expose Reginald for trying to edge him out of the firm. Or it could have been an excuse to be around Lady Wells or Mrs. Grisham.”

“Or that young maid, Alice,” Laura added with a delicate shudder. “You heard what they said about his tastes.”

Tabitha grimaced. “Maybe,” she said. “Any of those is possible. After what happened today, I imagine Mr. and Mrs. Paddington as well as all of the others will be on high alert.

Perhaps we should all take a small pause from the active investigation after we have questioned the Paddingtons tomorrow. We should take the next day to simply perceive how the other guests act when they feel less under scrutiny.”

“That’s a clever idea, if a risky one,” Reginald said with a nod. “I’m surprised how astute you are, Tabitha. I don’t think I’ve ever met a woman like you.”

“Nor have I met a man like you,” Tabitha

replied, smiling a little bashfully at him. “The way you handled the suspects today was truly sublime. I cannot believe that it is not your career.”

“I intended it to be,” Reginald told her. “I only went into financial law after my father’s death. Perhaps in the future, the firm can change directions, especially with my search for a new partner.”

“I can see you as a criminal lawyer,” she replied. Before she could get any further

though, Daniel cleared his throat.

“First off, Reg, your ‘search’ for a new partner better not go much further than his room,” he said, in a tone that Tabitha *thought* was joking. “Second, if you two could keep your flirtations until *after* dinner, it would work wonders on my stomach.”

“Flirtations?” Tabitha asked, trying to keep herself from looking as embarrassed as she felt. “No, I was simply—”

“Danny, don’t embarrass her,” Reginald said, a little more harshly than Tabitha thought was warranted. “We are all quite informal, yes, but do not forget that this is a gentleman’s daughter.”

“And my sister-in-law,” Daniel replied. “We’re family. And besides, I wasn’t teasing *her*.”

“Dear, perhaps we should retreat a little,” Laura suggested gently but firmly, tugging on her husband’s arm. “Come, you can show me

the room which you are now sharing with
Reginald.”

“And where am I to sleep tonight?”

Reginald asked, raising an eyebrow.

Laura blushed a deep pink, but Daniel
laughed. “*Now* who is the one doing the
teasing?” he asked. “Do not worry. By the time
you come along to bed, Laura will be back
here with her sister as we agreed.”

“Quite,” Laura replied. “I simply believe

that my husband and I should perhaps give you some privacy, and take some for our own. We have decided to recommit to our marriage, you see, and we cannot do that if we have *no* time to talk.”

Reginald opened his mouth again, but Tabitha shot him a look. The two of them met eyes, and then, to Tabitha’s pleasure, he conceded with a nod.

She turned to her sister. “You’re perfectly correct, of course, Laura. I will see you in a

few hours. Go and spend time with your husband while Reginald and I finish dinner. It will do us all good to think of something other than the horrible events of the last few days.”

Laura gave Tabitha a gratified smile, then she and Daniel left, holding hands the entire way. The sight made Tabitha smile.

I'm glad those two have found a way through their awkwardness, even if it took such a strange circumstance to make it possible.

It was only after a few full minutes of silence that the reality of the situation hit her—she and Reginald were now entirely alone together. Yes, she had been with him all day, but it was one thing to walk through a fully-lit corridor and another to be in a closed room with only a few candles lit.

Have I ever even been alone with a man other than my father or male cousins in such a way? I do not think so.

Strangely, she found that she didn't

mind. In fact, she was actually flattered that Reginald seemed to want to spend time with her in this way. She worried a little that she may say something off-putting, but that was a problem which she would deal with when she got to it.

Reginald cleared his throat. She couldn't see his expression too clearly in the dark, but if she had to guess, she would have said he was a little uncertain too. Somehow, that thought made Tabitha feel significantly better about the whole thing.

“So,” she said eventually. “You really *were* hoping to replace Mr. Barton at your firm?”

“I was,” Reginald told her. He sounded relieved to have a conversation topic to cling onto. “I attended this party with half a mind to try to convince him to retire. I wanted him out . . . but not like this. I hated the man, but I never wanted him dead. He cheated my poor father for his whole life, and I wasn’t about to allow him to cheat me too—but there were

cleaner ways to ensure that than murder.”

Tabitha nodded. “I understand,” she said. She hesitated, but then admitted, “Well, I try to. I’m afraid I’m not particularly business-minded, but it seems to me that you were planning on doing the right thing before all of this drama. Were you close to your father?”

Reginald nodded, a wistful smile on his face. “More than most. I never knew my mother, you see—she died in childbirth. My whole childhood, there were only my nurses

and my father. He was uncommonly active in raising me, where many men would have left the job entirely to the staff. Even when I went to school and then university, he would visit me often.”

“What happened?” Tabitha asked quietly.

“If you feel comfortable sharing.”

He shrugged a little. “The physician who gave his diagnosis said it was a cancer of the lungs,” he said quietly. “He never even told me about it until he’d tried every option

available—he even visited a surgeon, but neither bleeding nor surgery helped much. By the time he finally admitted the truth to me, it was only a few months before his death. He pleaded with me to ensure that Barton never took full control of the firm, and so I altered my studies and obeyed his last wish.”

Tabitha put a hand on his arm. He didn’t pull away. “How simply awful,” she said. “How long ago did it happen?”

“Oh, six or seven years now,” Reginald

said. “I hope that I have done him proud, but I am still trying to dig the firm out of several mountains worth of debt. When Daniel announced to me that he married Laura, I was truly shocked. I’ve been so wrapped up in my business for so long that I’d almost forgotten the ideas of courting and marriage and love.”

For some reason, this proclamation made Tabitha’s heart beat a little faster. “I . . . see,” she replied. “So then, you are not courting anyone? There are no women in your life with whom you share a special bond?”

He shook his head. “I’ve never had an official courtship,” he admitted. “And the only woman with whom I came close left my life when my father died—for the good of both of us, I think.”

It was hard to believe that a man so handsome, witty, and kind should not yet have been claimed, but Tabitha found that she was more excited than surprised by the idea. “I see,” she said. “What was her name?”

*Why did I ask that? He's going to be
offended that I was so forward.*

However, Reginald did not even seem to find the question particularly odd. "Her name was Colette," he replied. "She was uncommonly pretty, and I have no doubt she made a good wife for some very lucky man. But she was never meant for me, I think. We would have both lived in regret if we had gone ahead with the courtship and engagement as planned."

Tabitha nodded slowly.

“And you?” he asked. She looked up and saw an intensity in his warm brown eyes that made her feel as though her belly was filled with warm tea. “A lovely young woman like you, so quick of tongue and intelligent. You must have suitors by now.”

Tabitha laughed incredulously. “Do you perhaps need eyeglasses, sir?” she teased. “I know that I am not unattractive physically, but most men are rather put off by my

attitude.”

“Oh, come now,” Reginald replied, seeming to relax. “I do not believe that for a second. Can you honestly sit there and tell me that you have never once fallen in love?”

Tabitha considered, and then said, “Well, there was one man.”

She couldn’t decipher the look on Reginald’s face. “Do tell,” he said.

“I fell deeply for him last year,” she said, trying to bite back her mischievous smile. “His name was Henry, and he was the kind of quirky man who knew of the womanly arts of fiction and muslin, and thoroughly believed in knowing a woman before they wed. He could be serious or sarcastic as the situation called for it, and he really was the ideal candidate for a woman slightly out of step with the rest of society.”

“I see,” Reginald said. Was that . . . no, it couldn’t be *jealousy* in his voice, could it? “If

this man was so perfect for you as he sounds,
then why is it that you remain unmarried?”

Tabitha grinned. “Unfortunately for me,
the late Miss Austen married him off to
Catherine, and I had to make do with the men
who actually exist.”

“Miss Austen?” Reginald asked, looking a
little bit confused. Then his expression cleared
and he laughed incredulously. “My dear
impossible woman, are you referring to Henry
Tilney?”

It was Tabitha's turn to be confused. "You have read *Northanger Abbey*?" she asked incredulously.

Reginald shrugged and responded a little defensively. "And why not?" he asked. "A woman in my social circle mentioned it was quite an interesting satirical take on the Gothic motif, and I found myself curious."

"And yet you have never read *Frankenstein*!" Tabitha continued in disbelief.

“You are a bizarre man, Reginald Hatcher.”

“And you are a bizarre woman. And to be fair, those books were published only recently, so I did not have the time to devote to them. Perhaps it is fate that paired us up together on this little murder mystery,” Reginald responded with a chuckle. “Besides, I *have* started to read *Frankenstein*. I simply haven’t had the time to finish, what with everything going on.”

“Well, you must find the time. I insist

upon it,” Tabitha told him.

He laughed again. It was a nice sound, like the crackling of a fireplace in midwinter, warm and soothing. “As you say,” he agreed. “But tell me, have you *really* never fallen for a man other than Austen’s hero?”

Tabitha shrugged. “I have yet to meet his equal.”

They teased each other about books and love for a little longer before the door opened

and a pleased-looking Laura announced her return.

“That is my call to bid you goodnight,” Reginald said. He took Laura’s hand and kissed it, then, to Tabitha’s surprise, swooped down and kissed her on the cheek. “Sleep well, Mrs. Tilney.”

When he was gone, Laura tilted her head. “Mrs. Tilney?” she asked, confused.

“You need to read more,” Tabitha told

her, sliding into bed to try to hide her
secretive smile.

The sisters spoke a little of Laura and
Daniel's rejuvenated relationship before Laura
fell asleep. It did good for Tabitha to see her
sister so happy. She had spent several months
worried, but now she saw that there was no
reason for it at all.

Her thoughts turned to *Northanger Abbey*.
Admitting that she had fancied a written
character may have been a little silly, but

Henry Tinley really had been the perfect man in her eyes. He was patient and willing to teach Catherine, but not afraid to tease her too. He had a broad knowledge of both masculine and feminine arts, and he was willing to let Catherine take the lead in love. He was affectionate and kind, and entertaining and clever, and . . .

Oh my.

Because it was only at that moment that Tabitha realized, lying in the dark and waiting

on sleep to take her, that she may have met a man fitting that very description without even realizing it.

And this very man is sleeping just down the hall from me even now.

Chapter 11

Persona Non Grata

Indeed, Mr. Sharpe was beginning to despair that all of his training up until now had been for naught.

What knew he of the affairs of the immoral, and the dishonest? And how could he find the truly guilty party when each stage of the investigation suggested that not a single person here was completely innocent?

Excerpt from *Death in a Storm* (1818) by T.

Oakley, p. 149.

Reginald had not been particularly
looking forward to questioning the

Paddingtons. He found Mr. Paddington quite hapless and the daughter rather silly, neither of which in itself was a crime, but the wife of the family he found almost intolerable. Mrs. Janet Paddington had not a word of pleasantry to spare for anyone and, though he quite agreed with many of her sentiments about Mr. Barton, he did not particularly want to expose himself or Tabitha to more of her insults than he absolutely had to.

Daniel was clearly of a similar mind, though Reginald cursed his friend for being

quicker on the draw, as it were. Daniel had suggested that he and Laura spend the day trying to soothe the injured emotions of the Grishams and Lady Wells while Tabitha and Reginald dealt with the Paddingtons, and Reginald was not quick enough to object before it was agreed.

“I suggest that we start with Miss Joanna,” Tabitha said, catching his attention from his mutinous thoughts against his friend. “She seems rather . . . controlled by her mother, and I think it may be a good idea to

question her alone.”

That sounded like a tolerable start, but Reginald frowned. “You do not think that Miss Paddington is somehow involved? Not to be cruel, but she does not seem to have the wit for it.”

“No, I don’t,” Tabitha replied. “Even if she does have an untapped intelligence, her temperament simply doesn’t fit such a crime, unless she is a greater actress than any the world has ever seen. However, we should not

discount the value of her testimony just because she is a little silly. She was ostensibly the first to find the body—who knows what she might have seen?”

Feeling appropriately chastised, Reginald said, “You’re right, of course. Shall I fetch her?”

Tabitha smiled at him a little wryly. “How about you secure a room for our interview? I do not imagine Mrs. Paddington will take well to a handsome young man

calling on her daughter, even now.”

“You think me handsome?” Reginald asked.

Tabitha just grinned before hurrying off.

With a pleased smile on his own face, Reginald left to do as she'd asked. He found an appropriate small study right next to the Paddingtons' suite, and thirty minutes later he was seated inside with Tabitha beside him and a nervous, pale Joanna Paddington on the

other side of the desk.

“You needn’t look so panicked,” Tabitha said kindly. “Nobody suspects you.”

“Are you sure?” Miss Joanna asked nervously. “For I must tell you, I would have no idea how to even kill Mr. Barton. I have never held poison in my life, unless one counts the particularly strong wine that Father sometimes has me hide from Mother.”

Tabitha bit her lip in what Reginald

suspected was a valiant attempt not to laugh.

He took over to save her the embarrassment.

“We don’t think that you killed him, Miss Joanna. Do you feel comfortable continuing to talk to us?”

“Yes. I do,” Joanna replied, sounding awed that he was speaking to her. “To be honest, I didn’t know that you knew my given name, Mr. Hatcher.”

“Yes, well,” Reginald said a little

awkwardly. “Miss Tabitha and I simply wish to ask you some questions about what happened that night.”

“Oh . . .” Joanna replied. Her eyes filled with tears and she began to weep for what Reginald thought must be the thousandth time in the last few days. “Well, you see, Miss Tabitha, Mr. Hatcher, it was truly horrible. I had seen Mr. Barton walking along the corridor only an hour or two before, so I thought that he might simply be lying down, you see.”

“You thought that he might be lying down . . . from the top of a staircase?” Tabitha asked. Reginald could tell that she was trying very hard to keep the astonishment from her voice but, regretfully, she was not being particularly successful.

Thankfully, Joanna didn't seem to notice. “Well, yes,” she replied, nodding seriously. “He was drinking heavily like a few of the other guests. I thought he simply passed out from that. I went to wake him, for you see, I

thought it was an odd place to sleep. But when I touched him, he was terribly cold.”

She does say ‘you see’ rather a lot. I wonder if it is her way of ensuring she is being understood.

“And then? What happened after that?”

Tabitha pressed.

“Well, I shook him a little, but when he flopped around, I realized that he must be dead,” Joanna replied. She began to cry again.

“Poor Mr. Barton. He was always so nice to me!”

I pray that you never find out why.

“And then you screamed?” Reginald asked.

Joanna nodded. “I screamed ever so loudly. I didn’t know what to do. People started to arrive not long after. Mother and Father first, then Mr. Grisham, then Lady Wells. Mrs. Grisham came a little later, and

she had that maid with her, Alice.” She stopped to delicately blow her nose as her tears continued. “Mrs. Grisham screamed, too, you see, and then Alice tried to help me with the body . . .”

“And shortly after, we arrived, is that right?” Tabitha asked, scribbling in that notebook of hers. “And nothing else happened in between times?”

“Nothing,” Joanna sniffed.

“How about when you saw Mr. Barton earlier that night? What was he doing up so late?” Reginald asked. “Was he perhaps escorting Lady Wells?”

Miss Joanna tilted her head curiously. “No, not at all. Why ever would he be doing such a thing?” she asked. “He was alone, I do believe, simply strolling along. He didn’t notice me at all.”

“So late?” Tabitha asked.

Miss Joanna shrugged. "Perhaps he had trouble sleeping, and so was searching for a glass of warmed milk. I did say that he drank a lot. That's why I was up so early, as well, you see. For a glass of milk, that is." Then she closed her eyes and buried her head in her arms and began to weep once more.

Somehow, I doubt that your intentions and Mr. Barton's were in line with one another.

"I do see," Tabitha said. "Miss Joanna, you look terribly upset. Would you prefer that

we stopped our questioning for now?”

Miss Joanna looked up, her eyes wide.

“You would do that for me? Are we friends?”

Reginald and Tabitha glanced at each other, and then Reginald said, “We’re all friends here, Miss Joanna.”

“And of course, we don’t wish for you to be upset,” Tabitha added. “You’re a sweet girl, Miss Joanna, and it seems to me that you should be as happy as one can manage. I

promise you that we will not continue if we are upset.”

“God bless you both,” Miss Joanna said enthusiastically, her eyes wide and earnest even as more tears spilled from them. “How could it be that He has sent two of his angels to me as friends?”

Feeling a little unnerved now, Reginald awkwardly patted her hand. “There, there,” he said. “We shall leave you alone for now.

Perhaps with a small break to collect yourself,

you will be able to remember more.”

Tabitha nodded. “Yes, that’s right. And remember, even the smallest detail could be imperative. If you recall *anything* about Mr. Barton or any of the others from that night—anything at all—can I have your word that you will bring it to one of us?”

Miss Joanna straightened her back, a new look of resolve on her face. “I will,” she said. She hesitated, but then said, “I know people think me silly because I think a little

differently from most. I cannot tell you how much it means to me that you value my opinion.”

Suddenly, Reginald felt a little bad for thinking so dismissively of the girl. How must it be to be aware of your flaws and have them constantly pointed out? How must it feel to think that nothing you had to say would ever be treated with value, just because you did not quite fit?

He glanced over and saw a similar

expression cross Tabitha's face to the one he imagined on his own. Tabitha reached over the table and took the girl's hand.

“Listen to me,” she said firmly. “I also think differently to the rest of them. Not as differently as you, Miss Joanna, but that doesn't mean that it is a bad thing. In fact, it may be a gift. Your way of thinking might be what brings the world into its next age.”

Miss Joanna stared at her in shock. “But . . . Miss Tabitha, my mother says that I am

stupid. She says that I will never be able to be a woman in my own right.”

“That is nonsense,” Reginald told her, inspired by Tabitha’s words. “You are emotional, yes, and you perceive things in a unique way, but you are *already* a woman.”

“Perhaps someone should tell your mother that you will never be able to grow into a gentlewoman if she never allows you to live,” Tabitha added. “I truly think that the main difference between you and I is that my

parents gave me more freedom to be who I am. If you still want to, once all of this is over, I will speak with your parents on your behalf.”

“As will I,” Reginald said, before he could second-guess all of this. “But first, we must solve this murder so that we can all leave and return to our lives. Will you help us with that, Miss Joanna?”

This time, the tears in Joanna’s eyes did not look at all upset or confused. In fact, they looked determined. “I will,” she said. “I swear

it. As soon as I remember anything else, I will tell you.”

“All right, then,” Tabitha replied.

“Reginald and I shall leave and allow you to collect yourself a little. Will you be quite all right on your own?”

“You know, for the first time in a long, long while, I think that I just might,” Joanna replied with a watery smile.

They sat with her for a few more

minutes, and then, at Tabitha's gesture, the two of them walked out of the room. When they were alone in the corridor, they glanced at one another.

What happened next didn't surprise Reginald, though perhaps it should have. Tabitha stepped forward, and he opened his arms. She leaned against his chest, her arms around his waist, and he held her for a moment. They didn't move, didn't say anything—just spent the time in each other's arms, considering what had just happened.

When they broke apart, neither looked nor felt embarrassed. Tabitha gave Reginald a faint, troubled smile and said, “This isn’t a game, is it?”

“Not at all,” Reginald replied. He smiled back at her as bravely as he could manage. “Now,” he said. “Are you ready to question the parents about the murder?”

Tabitha choked out a laugh. “About as ready as I am to tame a lion,” she confessed.

He grinned, and together the two of them headed to the Paddingtons' suite.

“I’m glad that he’s dead,” Mrs. Paddington said coolly. “In fact, I wish you would hurry up and discover who did it so that I may go and shake their hand.”

“Janet, please,” Mr. Paddington begged, wringing his hands in his lap. “You’ll get us

into trouble.”

Mrs. Paddington snorted. “Trouble with whom? Neither of these people are with the constabulary. I could admit to murdering Barton right here and now and there isn’t a single solitary thing that either of them could do about it.”

Reginald and Tabitha looked at each other. Tabitha wore a look of extreme alarm on her face, and Reginald was sure that his expression mirrored it. “Are you *confessing* to

killing him then?” Reginald asked cautiously.

“I’m saying that the fact that he is dead should be celebrated with parades, not investigations,” Mrs. Paddington replied. Mr. Paddington had gone pale at her words, but she either didn’t notice or simply didn’t care. “Do we investigate when the rat-catcher takes out a rodent, or when the bug-controller cleanses your home with brimstone? No! We pay them for the privilege!”

“This was a man, not an insect or a rat,”

Tabitha said in a professional tone.

Mrs. Paddington smiled almost pityingly.

“You only say that because you didn’t know him, child.”

“*Janet*,” Mr. Paddington pleaded. “Stop this at once! You will cause a scandal!”

His wife laughed. “A scandal! We are trapped in the house with a dead man and one of us is a murderer. Your debts are suddenly forgiven, Grisham has his wife back, and God

only knows what Alma has been up to. There's no *causing* a scandal, husband—we're in one already."

Reginald cleared his throat. "Mrs. Paddington, I'd appreciate a straight answer—did you or did you not have anything to do with Mr. Barton's death?"

The woman turned her gaze on him then shrugged. "What say you? Did I do it, Mr. Hatcher? Shall I hang?"

I'm starting to become infuriated. What game is this woman playing?

Apparently, Tabitha saw the look on his face, for she suddenly spoke up, “As you so astutely observed, we are not officers of the law. We simply want the truth. Won’t you help us reach it?”

Reginald gave her a grateful smile. His eyes went to Mr. Paddington, who was still wringing his hands and looking nervous.

While Miss Joanna had a mind that worked

differently and seemed to hide a unique kind of intelligence, her father seemed every bit as hapless now as at first glance.

“The truth,” Mrs. Paddington repeated.

“Well, let’s have some truths, Miss Oakley. Mr. Barton was a vile creature who anyone in this house would have been more than justified to murder. The truth is that both you and my daughter have been saved from harassment and possibly worse by the fact that he doesn’t exist anymore. The truth is that if I *was* the one who slipped that poison in his glass, I

would never admit it—but I wouldn't deny it either, because doing it would be a point of pride.”

Tabitha opened her mouth, but then closed it again, looking troubled. Reginald took a deep breath then said, “Mr. Paddington, would you be willing to answer some questions, perhaps?”

“Him?” Mrs. Paddington said scornfully. “Please. John didn't kill him. John can barely walk in a straight line without asking

permission first.”

“What a way to talk about your husband!” Tabitha said, shocked. “What if he spoke about you that way?”

“Then he would not have a wife for much longer,” Mrs. Paddington replied, sounding unconcerned. “John and I have an arrangement, don’t we?”

“Yes, dear,” Mr. Paddington said nervously. “I know how lucky I am to have

you.”

“There, see?” she said, looking satisfied.

“Now, are we to go around in circles all day, or did you have any further questions?”

“I’d just like to know about the whereabouts of both of you that evening,” Reginald said. “Starting from when the party separated off to bed.”

Mrs. Paddington rolled her eyes and sighed so theatrically that Reginald wondered

if he'd secretly been on a stage the whole time. "Oh, very well," she drawled. "Let me see . . . Joanna and I stayed awake for a spot of tea. Afterward, we retired to bed, and I slept. John snored, as usual, so I woke up to send him to the sofa to allow me to rest a little. A few hours after that, we woke again from Joanna's scream. We rushed together and discovered her by the body. That's all."

"And . . . nothing else?" Reginald asked, raising an eyebrow. "You expect me to believe that you were simply asleep the whole time?"

“Believe what you like,” Mrs. Paddington replied with a shrug. “I don’t particularly care.”

“My wife was with me all night,” Mr. Paddington added nervously. “She could not have been involved.”

A few more questions resulted in similarly circular responses, until at least Reginald was forced to admit that this conversation was going nowhere. He signaled

to Tabitha, who nodded and got to her feet.

“Well, we shall leave for now,” Tabitha said. “But please know that we may return with more questions.”

Mrs. Paddington just scoffed. Reginald considered saying something, then realized how utterly pointless it would be. Together, he and Tabitha left the room, each with a small frown on their face.

“Well,” Tabitha said when they were finally alone. “That was . . . a lot to consider.”

“You’re telling me,” Reginald replied with a chuckle. “That poor hapless man was almost certainly not involved.”

“I don’t know about that,” Tabitha replied thoughtfully. “*He* was the one in debt, after all. He would not be the first murderer to use low wits as a cover for a crime.”

Reginald considered her, feeling impressed and not a little proud. How quickly her mind worked! He hadn't even considered such a thing. "You're not wrong," he said finally. "But I do think we need to maintain focus on the wife. Between her, Lady Wells, and Mrs. Grisham, I have the feeling there's a distinctly feminine touch on this murder."

Tabitha nodded, but looked troubled. She didn't speak as they walked along the corridor, becoming so quiet for so long that Reginald started to feel uncomfortable.

“What?” he asked finally. “What’s wrong?”

“I just don’t know what we should do next,” Tabitha replied. “Daniel and Laura have spoken to the servants again with no results, and though we have several suspicious candidates, we’re not any closer to solving this mystery than we were in the first place. Everyone has a motive, and they all agree that his death was justified. However, none of them confess to the murder. How do the

pieces fit together here?”

Reginald nodded, wishing he could do something to lift her frown. The weather outside echoed her apparent mood, the storm still crashing unnaturally and seemingly endlessly.

“How about,” he said after a moment, “we take tomorrow off? We must gather our intelligence, and attacking with the same questions again and again will get us nowhere.”

Tabitha raised an eyebrow. “Mr. Hatcher, are you proposing to spend the day with me?”

A smile blossomed on her face, and Reginald found himself grinning in return. It was amazing how, with only a little smile, she’d managed to make him feel as if he’d achieved the world’s greatest victory.

“Miss Oakley,” he said, “I believe that I am.”

Chapter 12

Bona Fide

The eye of the storm, they say, is when a silence falls so eerily that nobody knows what to make of it. Miss Willoughby felt herself in that strange liminal place now as she looked out the window to where the rustling trees had fallen still—so still, in fact, that it seemed as if someone had stolen the Earth’s very breath.

Excerpt from *Death in a Storm* (1818) by T.

Oakley, p. 202

Tabitha went to breakfast the next morning with a stomach so full of butterflies

that there was no room remaining for food.

She, her sister, and her brother-in-law ate alone at the large table, while everyone else was doing God only knew what.

She had to admit that her mind was elsewhere. At dinner last night, she'd agreed to meet Reginald in the attic at nine in the morning today. As that time very slowly approached while she ate breakfast, her imagination was running wild with what, exactly, they would discover up there.

*And we shall be alone. Perhaps I should ask
Laura to accompany me, for propriety's sake.*

For some reason, though, she found that she didn't like that idea one bit.

“Tabby, won't you at least take a bite of your eggs?” Laura clucked with sisterly concern. “If you don't eat now, you will feel quite faint later.”

Tabitha blinked. Laura's voice seemed to loom out of nowhere, intruding on her

thoughts in an unnaturally loud manner. “Hm . . .? Oh, I’m, well, I’m not hungry,” she replied.

Why am I stammering?

Daniel eyed her, and then chuckled.

“Don’t bother, Laura,” he said. “She’s barely here with us at all. She’s probably counting the seconds until it’s time to go meet Reggie for their secret encounter.”

Tabitha felt her face burn up and

wondered just how furiously red it had turned as Laura gasped and slapped her husband on the arm.

“Danny, you devil,” Laura scolded.

“Don’t make it sound so sordid. I am sure that Tabby and Reginald are just going to explore a little. Why, we could join them if we wanted to, and neither would object.”

“Of course you could,” Tabitha replied.

She paused, then said, “Er, but you’re not going to, right?”

Laura and Daniel exchanged a look which Tabitha had seen pass between her parents before—a mixture of amusement and exasperation.

“Just be careful, dear,” Laura said mildly.

Daniel laughed and put an arm around Laura’s shoulders. “Don’t you worry. Reg is a gentleman. Tabitha will be fine.”

“Perhaps it isn’t *Reginald* that concerns

me,” Laura replied with a teasing glint in her eyes.

Tabitha more or less ignored their banter, her eyes going to the clock on the wall. It was only a half hour after eight in the morning. Why was time moving so slowly? She simply wanted—

“Oh, just go, Tabitha,” Daniel said. “I promise you. Reg is just as eager as you are. He’s already up there.”

“That’s not . . .” Tabitha started, but she stopped when she realized that the lie would sound unconvincing no matter what. “Well, all right. Thank you for, er, letting me know.”

“Be *careful*,” Laura called after her again, but it was too late. Tabitha was already on her feet, hurrying to the stairs—away from this murder mystery, and toward something even more strange and unknown.

And exhilarating.

When Tabitha climbed the final rung of the ladder that led up to the attic, she immediately felt as if she was stepping into some other world. It was dusty and forgotten up here, filled with so many items that they must have spanned generations. How old was that wardrobe in the far corner? How long had those dust-filled boxes sat piled in the corner, brimming with hats and gloves in the fashions of centuries past?

“What do you think?” a voice asked behind her, snapping her from her reverie so quickly that she almost cried out in alarm. Tabitha spun in place to see Reginald standing behind her with an outrageous floral bonnet on his head and a strange colored fur scarf around his neck. “Don’t I look wonderful?”

Tabitha stared at him for a few moments then started to giggle. “You look *ridiculous!*”

Reginald put on a face of mock offense. “How could you say such a thing?” he asked,

exaggeratedly wounded. “I’ll have you know that this look was once the very height of fashion!”

Tabitha laughed even harder. “For ladies!” she replied. “It looks so silly with your trousers and cravat!”

Reginald grinned, obviously pleased by her reaction, and Tabitha found herself very drawn to his expression. He had extremely intriguing lips for a man, the kind that a person may have to kiss just to find out if they

were as soft as they looked, and when he smiled it made the temptation all the stronger.

Tabitha, behave yourself! Is this what Lu meant when she warned me to be careful?

“Come,” Reginald said, holding out a hand. Without even thinking about it, Tabitha took it and allowed him to lead her more deeply into the massive attic. “Let us find a man’s hat for you.”

They did find one, a gentleman’s hat

perhaps fifty years out of fashion, adorned with embellishments that made it look like a caricature of itself. Tabitha eagerly pulled it over her hair and accepted an odd monocle to go along with it as an accessory. The two of them searched until they found a mirror, and then spent some time admiring their new reflections.

“What a fine gentleman you make,” teased Reginald. “You shall find yourself invited to the finest clubs before long. Be careful of the younger maidens, though—some

are known to bite.”

Tabitha made a face. “Not as fine a gentleman as you make a beautiful lady,” she replied. “Why, I fear that I shall have to marry you on the spot!”

“Oh, sir!” Reginald simpered in a strange falsetto. “Do not make me, a poor fine maiden, these promises which you cannot keep!”

Both of them collapsed into laughter then, so hard that Tabitha felt amused tears in

her eyes. The joke hadn't even been that funny, but something about behaving in such a lighthearted and silly manner after all of the pressure of the last few days elevated it to the highest comedy.

Once they had calmed down and discarded the hats and accessories, the pair got up to explore the attic a bit more in-depth. They discovered a whole wall with paintings stacked in huge piles, haphazardly tossed aside and forgotten over the years. Some were portraits—they found one of Mr. Grisham's

maternal grandmother, who looked *oddly* like her grandson—and some were landscapes and other traditional art.

“Who do you suppose painted the most recent of these?” Reginald mused as he flipped through a pile. “Look, this one is only fourteen years old. You don’t suppose Grisham is a secret artistic savant?”

“I would never have imagined him with a paintbrush,” Tabitha confessed. She went to the other side of the wall, where the bright

colors told her that more of the paintings were relatively new. “Maybe he had someone paint them for him?”

“Perhaps,” Reginald agreed. “Then why abandon them to the attic? By all accounts, he is a strange man.”

“Yes, I—oh, goodness!” Tabitha exclaimed, her hands flying to her mouth as she lifted a painting dated around twenty years earlier. “Is this *Mrs. Grisham?*”

Reginald hurried over and the pair of them examined the painting with wide eyes. It was Mrs. Grisham—a much younger version of her. She lay across a lounging chair wearing a skirt so daringly short that Tabitha could not help but feel embarrassed, and it was clear from the expression on her face that the artist had taken his time with every single little detail.

“She’s practically nude!” Reginald exclaimed, turning quickly away.

It was an exaggeration, but not by a ridiculous margin. The clothing worn by the woman in that painting would have been enough to have her expelled from most churches even in this modern time, never mind before Tabitha was born.

Still, it is sweet to see how flustered he is over a painting, so much so that he turns away. Daniel was right—Reginald is a gentleman.

She carefully covered the painting and walked to his side, trying to keep the

amusement out of her voice for his sake.

“Come, let’s explore elsewhere,” she said.

“And try to remove that image from our mind.”

He shot her a wry look, but it was grateful too as he nodded. “I noticed several trunks in the far corner. Shall we root around inside and see what we find?”

“All right, then,” Tabitha agreed. “But I shall ask Grisham for any jewels that we find amongst the treasure.” She saw Reginald look

at her with that characteristic quirked eyebrow and shrugged. “You never know. Barton and Grisham could have been pirates on the side. The former certainly seems enough of a cur.”

Reginald walked over to the first trunk and spied a name on it that decidedly wasn't Grisham's. He knew that Barton stored some of his things in the strange study arrangement downstairs, but he hadn't realized there would be some of his things here, too.

“Tabitha, I found a box of Barton’s things,” he said. He kicked it gently with the toe of his boots. Even that small pressure was enough to spring the box open, as if it had been eager and waiting to spill its secrets.

Inside were . . . letters. Reams and reams of letters, most in different handwriting, most saved from one woman or another. It was like a strange trophy collection—letters of first love and then hate from every woman whose life he had touched.

Tabitha picked one up, read it over, and gasped. “Oh, my goodness, I think this is from that servant’s sister,” she said.

Reginald leaned over her shoulder as they read together.

I don't expect your love, Mr. Barton, but this child is yours. You may call me slattern or worse, you may tell people that I conned you into my embraces. You may tell people what you like, but please, do not ignore our child. I am a ruined woman with little reputation remaining to me. Do

not allow our child's life to be ruined, as well.

Tabitha frowned. She didn't want to finish the letter, and the light mood of a few moments before felt somewhat spoiled. A glance at Reginald showed that he looked positively sick. "Do you think that he ever replied?" she asked quietly.

"I know he didn't," Reginald said. His voice had taken on a dark, ugly tone, so much unlike his usual cheer that Tabitha almost jumped in surprise once more. "I know it, and

yet he kept the letter like a man may keep the head of a prize buck. These women, all of them—they were a game to him. And to keep them in Grisham’s house—almost like a gloat!”

Tabitha shivered as she remembered the way that Mr. Barton had looked at her when she first entered the house, and again when she recalled how Mrs. Paddington had insisted on keeping Miss Joanna close.

“I . . . I knew that you had issues in his

business and that there was drama over money and love, but this is horrific,” Tabitha finally said in a quiet voice. “This is a monster.”

Reginald hesitated, but then put a gentle arm on her shoulder. “That’s what everyone has been trying to tell you. But it doesn’t change anything.”

“Doesn’t it?” Tabitha asked. She bit her lip, chewing on it for a moment before speaking again. “Reginald, if Barton was as vile as everyone seems to universally believe,

then perhaps whoever killed him . . .”

“Don’t even think about it,” Reginald interrupted. “We cannot simply take justice into our own hands. This is a society based on laws and morals, and we cannot override those due to personal distaste. The fact is that someone here knowingly and willfully killed a man, and this person should be brought to an impartial judgment.”

Tabitha stared at him. The passion in his voice stirred something deep within her, and

she had to gulp a few deep breaths before she was able to respond. “You’re right, of course,” she said. “We have systems in place for a reason. It’s just, Reginald, now that we know what Mr. Barton was really like . . .”

“Tabitha,” Reginald said. He seemed to take a moment to gather himself and then, with a tiny nod, he stepped forward and took her hands in his. So surprised was Tabitha with the contact that she neither reacted nor pulled away. She simply gazed up into his eyes, burning with intensity as they stared

back at her.

“Reginald,” she replied, her heart like a bird in her chest. She was spellbound.

He smiled, then leaned down close to her ear, whispering in a voice she could barely hear, “*Life, although it may only be an accumulation of anguish, is dear to me, and I will defend it.*”

Tabitha gasped out loud. “*Frankenstein,*” she said. “You . . . you read it. When did you

have time to finish?”

“You asked me to read it,” Reginald replied. “Of course I did. I’ve only known you for a short time, Tabitha Oakley, but I have come to trust your judgment entirely. I ask only in return that you try to trust mine.”

“I . . .” Tabitha started. For the first time in her two decades of life, words failed her. “I . . .”

Then Reginald leaned down and pressed

his lips against her forehead. It was a subtle, chaste kiss, and yet it was also the most romantic and fulfilling experience that Tabitha thought had ever happened to anyone. When he pulled away, he let go of her hands, and she almost wept from the loss.

“Reginald,” she said, gathering her voice. “I’ve never met a person like you. I truly never thought that I would ever meet a man like you.”

“While you,” Reginald replied with a

nervous smile so at odds with his confidence a moment before, “are a woman I had convinced myself could never exist. Forgive me if I was too forward just now. I know that we only have a few days of acquaintance, and it may just be me, but—”

“It isn’t just you,” Tabitha interrupted quickly. “I do not know what this is. My head spins from how quickly everything is moving, and I cannot tell my emotions apart from the thrill of the chase and the fear of the murder and what I feel when—”

What I feel when I look at you.

She hadn't finished the sentence out loud, but from the expression on his face she thought that he might have understood it anyway.

“Tabitha, may I . . . I know that this is daring, but once this is all over, would you be amenable to me perhaps calling at your home?” Reginald asked. He ran a hand through his hair with a kind of shyness that

Tabitha would never have expected from him.

“I teased Laura once about how quickly she was caught up with Daniel,” Tabitha told him instead of replying. “I didn’t understand how quickly one could make a connection.”

“I did the same to Danny,” Reginald admitted. “It seemed to me that it was impossible to know a woman for such a short time and yet be so captivated. But now . . .”

“But now indeed,” Tabitha answered. She

stepped forward and, hesitant as a child with an injured bird, took his hand again.

They stared at each other, then matching smiles formed on their faces. It was terrible timing. A man was still dead and a murderer was on the loose. They'd only known each other a few days. And yet . . .

“Yes, Reginald,” Tabitha said softly. “I think that, presuming we all get out of here in one piece, an outing together when this is all over might just be perfect.”

Chapter 13

Coram Non Judice

It's well known that poison is the weapon of a woman. One does not require strength nor energy to sprinkle the toxic grains into a cup. For a man to stoop to such measures is cowardly, perhaps, but hardly impossible. The question, Mr. Sharpe knew, was whether the poison or the victim posed the biggest threat to the killer's reputation. If reputation makes a man, then what would he be willing to do to preserve it?

Excerpt from *Death in a Storm* by T. Oakley

(1818), p. 210

Reginald had rarely felt so giddy in his life. He would have felt like a monster to say that Barton's death had been *good* for him, but it would be hard to deny how happy he felt at the moment. His problems had all simply fled. He no longer needed to worry about his business—Barton had no legal heirs, and so Hatcher and Barton would revert solely to Reginald himself. He could hire Daniel as his official assistant, and he could rid himself of some of the more onerous deals . . .

And then there's Tabitha.

He knew that he mustn't get too ahead of himself, but the fact that she'd agreed on him calling made him wonder if she felt the strange, intense connection that he did every time he saw her.

“I tell you, Daniel,” he said, as the two men took their evening meal alone in their room that night. “She’s a marvel. She has a wit beyond any I have ever had cause to compare her to, and she’s so lovely that if she’d been born earlier, the greats would have

memorialized her in statues and paintings.”

Daniel took a sip of his soup from his spoon, wearing a strange little smile on his face and saying nothing. He simply nodded.

Reginald frowned. He had been expecting at least *some* reaction. “She’s accepted my offer to call on her, you know. We shall discuss the book she loves, and who knows—she may even take an interest in some of my more scholarly pursuits.”

“Yes, you’ve said,” Daniel told him lightly. “I’m very happy for you.”

It was a pleasant response, but not the one that Reginald wanted. In fact, he found himself feeling rather dissatisfied by it. *He* wanted to shout to the heavens, set off fireworks, hire a church choir . . . anything to display to the world how unbelievably happy he was now. How did he make Daniel understand this?

“I truly understand you, you know,”

Reginald said. “I understand how you ended up marrying Laura so quickly, even though it seemed so ridiculous to me at the time. They are truly the finest pair of sisters I have ever met. Had I met Tabitha at a ball in the course of the season, I firmly believe I may have proposed to her on the spot.”

Daniel chuckled. “You *are* taken with Tabitha,” he observed. “Well, congratulations to you for that. I am glad you’ve found happiness in this terrible situation.”

“You’re mocking me,” Reginald said.

Daniel shook his head. “No, my friend. What space would I have to judge? Laura and I were together so quickly that we scarcely had time to judge. As your friend, though, allow me to warn you—romances so speedy are not always as easy as one would like.”

Reginald tilted his head to the side a little. “You mean the awkwardness you’ve experienced with Laura?”

“Yes, amongst other issues,” Daniel replied with a nod. “I care for Laura with all of my heart and soul, but the fact remains that I have only known her for a few months. Even now, we cannot be said to know each other *well*. It has caused several communication problems since we were wed. One would comically think we were following tradition of marriage first, love afterwards.”

“And now? You still have those problems?” Reginald asked.

Daniel's serious expression gave way to a tiny smile. "Well. Very, *very* recently, things have changed in a way that I hope can continue. That doesn't mean the first part was easy."

"I think it's worth the risk," Reginald said virtuously.

With another laugh, Daniel patted him on the arm. "Do what makes you happy, Reg," he said. "We all need to do a bit more of that, I think."

The two of them finished their soup in a peaceful silence, Reginald thinking only of how pretty Tabitha had looked even with that silly hat and monocle on today.

“How goes the investigation?” Daniel asked abruptly, interrupting Reginald’s thoughts. “Have we cornered our murderer yet?”

“Not yet,” Reginald replied.

Daniel shrugged. “What will we do once we catch him or her? We’ll still be stuck here with no inspectors until the storm is over. Shall we lock them in the wine cellar and hope for the best, or is your plan just to kill them, too?”

Reginald blinked a couple of times.
“*What?*” he demanded.

Daniel’s laugh this time lacked some of his characteristic cheer. “Relax, Reg. It’s just a joke.”

“It’s hardly funny to joke about killing someone,” Reginald replied, feeling a mounting unease. “We can’t just slaughter people, even criminals.”

Daniel shrugged again. “Seems to me that this is what we’ll be doing once we hand them over to the law, anyway. Barton was a rich man, and this was a clear murder. They’ll hang by the neck until they’re dead—might even make a public event of it. You know how people love their executions.”

The room suddenly felt very cold, and Reginald found himself shivering as he pictured one of his prime suspects—Mrs. Paddington, Lady Wells, one of the Grishams—hanging from the gallows, their face drained, their eyes wide and unseeing.

Horrible. And yet isn't it justice if they killed Barton?

If he was honest with himself in private, Reginald didn't know the answer to that. He

felt ambivalent about executions in general, though he knew that sometimes they were necessary for the worst kinds of criminals. He'd always been able to rationalize it before. But thinking of it this time, thinking of the people who would hang and the man who had died, just made him feel . . . nauseated.

When he looked at Daniel again, his friend was watching him with a very serious expression and a knowing glint in his eyes. "Unpleasant, isn't it?" Daniel asked.

“Very,” Reginald replied. The uneasy feeling was growing, but he didn’t know why. “But it is what it is, Daniel. Our only job is to find the murderer. The courts will deal with the rest.”

“Right,” Daniel replied. “After that it’s entirely out of our hands.”

Daniel’s gaze seemed to slacken as he stared into the middle distance. Reginald waited for him to say more, then, when he didn’t, Reginald cautiously returned to eating.

He'd finished his soup and was halfway through his serving of chicken when Daniel spoke again.

“It just seems like an awful pity,” Daniel mused. “When we find whoever did this, I’d like to shake their hand before we send them off to the gallows.”

Reginald stared at him, reminded of Mrs. Paddington’s ominous words the day before. “What are you *talking* about?” he demanded. “Danny, we’re talking about a killer.”

“Mm,” Daniel replied, still looking absent. “Let’s not pretend this is a virtuous mission, though, my friend. We both hated that man, and his death is nothing but good for us. You cannot tell me that you haven’t considered it.”

Reginald hesitated. “I . . . not *seriously!* We can’t take joy in a man’s death.”

“I can and will,” Daniel replied stubbornly. “I simply don’t care. The old

scoundrel had it coming. Admit it, Reg—this is good for everyone.”

Reginald just grunted and returned to his chicken. Daniel stared at him for a few more minutes, but eventually he returned to his meal too. Neither of them mentioned the murder or the investigation again for the rest of the night, but Reginald could not stop thinking about it. His pleasant imaginings and memories of conversations with Tabitha were gone, replaced by one solitary fact that would change everything.

I never seriously considered Daniel for the killer. How could I? He's my best friend.

But now, hearing how eager and cold he was about the whole thing, Reginald realized at last—he was going to have to add his friend to the list.

Tabitha sat alone in the room she had once shared with Lady Wells, compiling her

notes. In an hour, she'd return to her current room to join Laura for their evening meal, but for now she was compiling the notes she'd gathered so far. Partly this was because they would return to the investigation first thing in the morning, and partly it was to give her a few moments to think about something else other than the smile that Reginald brought to her face.

While she scribbled, she kept a separate sheet of paper where she noted the changes she would make in her book. It was starting to

take shape now, and as the thunder crashed outside, Tabitha couldn't help but see it as a good omen.

She finished writing and looked down at the letter which she would bind to her manuscript and send to the publisher. The book would not finish until the case did, of course—but in any case, the end would be thrilling.

DEATH IN A STORM BY T. OAKLEY

When the illustrious Mr. Gordon Blake is killed at

his own party, the suspects are all trapped together by a raging storm. Without any outside help, it is up to amateur detective Ronald Sharpe and the investigative Miss Thalia Willoughby to solve the deadly crime. Their suspects include . . .

Tabitha paused. She could hardly use everyone's real names or she would end up in a lot of trouble—but that didn't mean she had to be subtle about her renamings.

On another piece of paper, she jotted down her cast.

Mr. Gregory Barton – Mr. Gordon Blake

Lady Alma Wells – Lady Anne Shaft

Mrs. Leona Grisham – Mrs. Lillian Graves

Mr. Basil Grisham – Mr. Brian Graves

Mrs. Janet Paddington – Mrs. Jill Payne

Mr. John Paddington – Mr. James Payne

Miss Joanne Paddington – Miss Jacqueline Payne

Mrs. Laura Roberts – Mrs. Lucy Redford

Mr. Daniel Roberts – Mr. Darren Redford

Miss Tabitha Oakley – Miss Thalia Willoughby

Mr. Reginald Hatcher – Mr. Ronald Sharpe

Tabitha put down her pen and could not prevent herself from smiling in satisfied amusement about a few of her cleverer choices. She would give the servants other names as well, and perhaps invent a fictitious company in which the victim worked.

Returning to her summary, she read it over again, hoping that the brief interlude would have allowed her to gather her thoughts. She put her pen to paper and tried again.

Their suspects include . . .

Tabitha stopped writing. She could not tell where the real problem lay. Was it that there were too many suspects, or was it simply that she had no idea where the story would end up? Each person they interviewed seemed

just as likely as the last to have been the one to commit the crime—and each had just as much plausible innocence.

This isn't just a book, Tabitha. This is real life. A man is dead, and one of these people that you are getting to know so well is a cold-blooded killer.

Tabitha knew that, and yet she found that her inspiration would not be stopped by this fact. This was a book calling to be written, and write it she would. There was only one

thing in her way now, and once it was remedied, the story would be released into the world where it was meant to be.

Tabitha put her things to the side, promising herself that she'd return later in the evening to write a little more, but knowing secretly that she'd probably get caught up in conversation about Reginald with Laura and write no more at all today. Regardless, she was thinking of her book as she walked along the corridor to her new bedroom where her sister was waiting, her mind going over the

facts again and again.

For the book to be finished, the story must first be finished. And for the story to be finished . . .

Well, Tabitha was just going to have to catch a killer.

Chapter 14

Obiter Dictum

When the realization crashed over Miss Willoughby, it was like the worst of waves in a sea storm claiming a ship setting off to find a new world. She had been so caught up in the excitement that she had not considered the truth: apart from her sister, Mrs. Redford, Miss Willoughby did not know any of these people very well at all. No matter how much her heart yearned to believe otherwise, everyone here was a suspect.

Excerpt from *Death in a Storm* (1818) by T.

Oakley, p. 241.

Laura had laid out a picnic blanket on the floor of the bedroom and neatly placed their meals in the middle of it. She grinned as Tabitha entered, and Tabitha's heart melted. Back when the two of them were children, it had been rare to be able to escape the hustle and bustle of the city, and so they had taken "holidays" in their attic. Tabitha would lay out a blanket and their dolls, and the two of them would pretend to be ladies in their country home.

More than a decade had passed since

their last “country picnic”, and seeing Laura making the old comforting gesture now almost made Tabitha want to cry from sheer joy. She sat down next to her older sister, giving her a quick hug.

“You shouldn’t have,” Tabitha said.

“Oh, but I had to,” Laura replied. She looked delighted by Tabitha’s reaction—and she should have been. She deserved it. “We may be trapped in this house physically, but it hasn’t yet claimed our souls.”

Tabitha smiled. “You’re right, of course. You so often are. So, tell me, sister, how *are* you? How was your day today, away from the hustle and bustle of criminal investigation?”

“Oh,” Laura said, blushing a little. “Well, Daniel and I took a walk around the house. He is behaving so affectionately these days, Tabby—you wouldn’t believe that he was the same man who felt too awkward to hold my hand in public only a week ago!”

“You two love each other,” Tabitha observed. “Truly. Even though you married so quickly, it was the right thing to do.”

Laura blushed prettily. “For us, yes, I think so. I’m not so sure that the same advice can or should apply to everyone, but I *am* glad that I didn’t overthink it.”

Tabitha smiled faintly. That was encouraging—it made her a little surer that she wasn’t losing her cognizance by how strongly she already wanted to spend time

with Reginald. She wasn't in love with him—
not yet, anyway—but she could feel that
perhaps it would not be long before she was.

*What am I thinking? This isn't at all what I
planned.*

Nonetheless, when she glanced back at
Laura, her sister was wearing *that* smile. “So,”
Laura said. “You spent the day with Reginald,
did you not?”

Tabitha managed to school her

expression into something neutral. “I did, as you well know,” she replied. “It was . . . nice. Extraordinarily so. I’ve never met a man willing to be so endearingly silly just to coax a smile from a woman. *And* he’s intelligent, and well-spoken, and—oh, *do* stop grinning like that, Lu!”

“What a surprise it would be for Mother if both of her daughters were married before the year is out!” Laura gushed. “Who could have ever expected!”

“Marriage!” Tabitha exclaimed. “Come now, Laura, I’ve known the man only three or four days. It’s far, far too soon to be thinking about *marriage*.” She paused, then, a little shyly, added, “But romantic or not, I do feel that he will have an impact on my life for a long time.”

Laura clapped her hands together. “A positive one, I hope! And certainly, he won’t be disappearing; you must visit Daniel and I as often as you can, and Reginald and Daniel are *quite* inseparable, you know. How quaint it

would be if we were married to a pair of
bosom friends!”

“Quite,” Tabitha agreed, laughing despite
the complicated nervousness in her stomach.
She wasn’t sure that she was ready to think or
talk about any of this, at least not yet. “But
first, let us not forget the small matter of a
murder to solve.”

“Oh, la; the murder,” Laura replied. She
got a small crease in her brow and said, “Yes.
It would be very pleasing to forget about it,

but I don't suppose such a thing is possible."

Tabitha gave a dry little chuckle. "Not really, no," she agreed.

"Well, I, for one, may go mad if we are stuck in this horrible old manor for much longer," Laura told her.

"I know," Tabitha said sympathetically. "But remember, until the storm is over there isn't much to be done about it. It may take a week or more before we can finally get out of

here.”

“Ugh! How horrible!” Laura exclaimed.

The two of them ate in silence for a little, Tabitha feeling unreasonably guilty about the look of upset on Laura’s face. Tabitha knew that it wasn’t *her* fault that there was a storm—but she felt bad nonetheless, as she found herself enjoying their seclusion for the novelty of it. Laura, meanwhile, was clearly suffering.

“Well,” Tabitha said after a few minutes

of silence. “There is good news. By the time our confinement is over, I may at last have produced a book ready for publication.”

“Really!” Laura exclaimed. Tabitha loved her for the fact that it wasn’t a question— Laura had obviously never doubted that Tabitha would get to this point. “That’s wonderful! Have you secured a printer?”

“Well,” Tabitha replied. “You remember my friend Cecilia, the one who married that earl a few years back?”

“Oh, yes, Frampton’s scandalous daughter,” Laura said, grinning. “You two got on so well when you met at the season. What of her?”

“She and her husband own a printing press where she produces her journal, *The Englishwoman’s Review*, in the city,” Tabitha said. “I contacted her about my vague idea for a book just before I came to visit you, and she told me that if I send her a complete manuscript, she may be able to see it printed!”

Laura gasped. “Tabby, that’s amazing! My little sister, a printed author! Oh, I cannot wait. Is it one of your Gothic murder mysteries?”

Tabitha hesitated for a second then nodded. “It’s morphed somewhat since our arrival,” she admitted. “My intention is to write the story that is happening around us right now. Fictionalized, of course, but close to the truth.”

“Oh, goodness. What a wonderful idea,”

Laura said. “I suppose you shan’t finish the book until we solve the crime, then. That’s quite the motivation. And I suppose it means you and Reginald shall have to work even more closely together, which I’m sure never even crossed your mind.”

“Do stop it,” Tabitha replied, but she was grinning.

Laura laughed. “Well, regardless, I am happy for you for your new friend and your

new direction with your novel. I've been dreadfully bored in the countryside but I imagine it's been quite dreary for you in Mother and Father's house alone, too."

"Like you can't imagine," Tabitha said with a snort. "Now that the season is over, she wants me to join her book club. *Her book club!* Imagine. All those old ladies talking about stuffy books by old men who think themselves better than everyone else and deride any other fiction."

Both sisters chuckled about that, and then Laura said, “Well, who knows how *my* life will be when I return home? I cannot imagine how Daniel will cope now that he doesn’t have Mr. Barton to quarrel with.”

“Yes, Reginald told me about the land dispute between the Bartons and the Robertses. Terrible business,” Tabitha replied.

Laura nodded. “Yes indeed. Reginald will, I imagine, be even happier. It may be crass to admit it, but this murder will get him

everything he needs to carry on as he wishes.

“What?” Tabitha asked sharply.

Laura didn't seem to notice the change in her younger sister's tone. “Well, he *has* been searching for a way to force Mr. Barton into retirement and hire Daniel as his partner instead. He always hated the man. And besides, as his business partner, since there are no legal heirs, Reginald is set to inherit almost all of his property.”

“He is?” Tabitha asked. She suddenly felt cold and more than a little lost.

There are only three people in the house that I have not questioned, and the only one I know for sure did not commit the crime sits before me right at this moment.

A stone fell hard into Tabitha’s stomach as she followed that thought to its inevitable conclusion. She did her best not to let Laura see that anything was amiss, but the facts were clear.

There was someone else with motive.
Someone entirely unaccounted for that night.
Someone who had been in control of the
investigation the entire time.

Though Tabitha didn't want to believe it,
she knew she had to consider the possibility
that Reginald—dear, sweet Reginald—was a
murderer.

And more terrifying, if it turned out to be
true, she had no idea how she'd react.

Reginald looked in the mirror and straightened the collar of his shirt. He was greatly disturbed by his thoughts about Daniel earlier in the day, and more disturbed by the fact that he had no idea how to confront them. He did not want to directly question Daniel on the matter. If Daniel was innocent, his friend would be horrified and perhaps offended by the questions. If Daniel was guilty . . .

*Well, I'm not sure that I'm ready to know if
he is guilty or not.*

He knew that he couldn't sustain that attitude long term, but he didn't know what else to do about it. Daniel was a friend, a brother—he was family. Did Reginald truly want to believe that he knew so little about someone who meant the world to him?

“Though,” he said to his reflection, “I suppose it goes back to whether or not there is such a thing as a moral murder.”

This only made him frown. He was a lawyer, and the gray area between right and legal had always troubled him greatly. Before he'd been shunted into financial law due to his father's premature death, he'd been working hard to become a solicitor who could work on cases that set new precedence of guilt and innocence.

Murder is murder.

He had to cling to that. Everything had

been thrown in the air over the last few days—a dead business partner, the strange allure of Tabitha, the sudden doubt surrounding Daniel—and Reginald barely knew where he stood anymore. Now was not the time to doubt himself.

“I must be decisive. I must act the same way no matter the end result,” he told himself.

But whether or not that was possible was a different problem. He knew that he would be able to gain no more rest until he had

investigated further. He would question all of the suspects, and question them again, and a third time for good measure. He'd interview as many times as he needed to find the true culprit and assure himself of Daniel's innocence.

For until he knew for sure one way or the other, he didn't know how he would ever rest again.

Chapter 15

Quantum Meruit

Suspicion is a worse toxin than any poison, and Mr. Sharpe felt it killing him more surely than whatever vile chemical had mixed with Mr. Blake's blood on that fateful night. As time went on, his places to turn became fewer and fewer. His friends were suspects. His enemies, too. Sometimes he woke in the night in a cold sweat and wondered if he hadn't simply murdered Blake himself.

Excerpt from *Death in a Storm* (1818) by T.

Oakley, p. 252.

Reginald wanted nothing more than to

talk to Tabitha over the next few days about his newfound suspicions, but every time he brought up the murder, she changed the subject. It was subtle but sure; she was being colder with him than she had been before. She was jumpy, nervous, and she insisted on pretending that everything was absolutely fine.

This was made a thousand times more difficult by Reginald's own mood. Every time he saw Daniel laughing or smiling, he was caught up in the horrific image of his friend

standing over Barton's body, laughing and gloating about the perfect crime. He knew that he had invented the image in his own head, but now that it had come, it wouldn't leave.

I have to talk to him. I have to.

He'd been telling himself so for days, and yet as he sat here having a stiff, awkward cup of tea across the table from Tabitha, he knew that today would not be the day.

"This lavender tea is really quite special,"

Tabitha said in a voice so neutral that it sounded almost automated.

“Indeed,” Reginald replied.

They fell back into silence, each sipping their cup. Reginald didn't understand what had happened. In the attic a few days before, everything had seemed wonderful. He knew that he was on edge and acting differently because of his newfound suspicions about Daniel, but something told him there was another problem.

She's keeping something from me. She refuses to talk about the murder, makes excuses to avoid continuing the investigation, and keeps her distance.

Perhaps she was quite mad. Perhaps she *had* killed Barton for the sake of a story as someone had ridiculously suggested that dreadful morning.

He glared at her through sleep-deprived, suspicious eyes for a few moments. He knew

that he was being paranoid, and some part of his brain told him how ridiculous that thought was to even consider, yet he could not push it from his mind.

Perhaps that was why he had been so intrigued by her in the first place, even! He'd always enjoyed the classes on the dark recesses of the criminal mind. Maybe he'd seen that type of behavior within her, that deep madness, and it had called to him to investigate. Maybe he should grab her now, before someone else got hurt.

“What?” Tabitha asked him. “Why are you staring?”

Reality hit Reginald like a stone to the head and he rubbed his eyes to clear them. What had he just been thinking? That dark, fanciful nonsense had no place in a mind such as his.

She's no killer, unless one counts how my heart stops when she smiles. Something she hasn't done in days.

“I’m sorry,” he said, meaning it more genuinely than she could ever know. “It’s this damned sleeplessness. I’ve had perhaps three hours over the last couple of days, and it’s making me think the most ludicrous things.”

She gave him a strange look from the side of her eye. “Guilty conscience?” she asked in a voice that was too strained to actually be the kind of tease she was trying to imply.

Something like that.

He wondered if she had come to the same conclusion about Daniel that he had. Perhaps that was why she had been distant and strange, and why she was avoiding Daniel. After all, he was not only Reginald's best friend—he was Tabitha's brother-in-law.

Tabitha gazed around the room, and now Reginald noticed the dark circles that had appeared under her pretty eyes. It seemed he wasn't the only one who had slept poorly.

“We’re alone,” she said. Her voice shook with an unexplained trepidation. “Would you mind if we talked a little more seriously now, where nobody can hear us?”

Here it comes.

“Speak freely,” he told her. “There’s nothing you can say that will truly bother me.”

“Very well,” Tabitha replied. She met his eyes and, for some reason, blushed. He had

the distinct air that she quickly changed her question before speaking when she said, “Have you interrogated Daniel yet?”

Reginald took a deep breath. Despite his own doubts, a flare of defensiveness over his friend threatened to take over his rational mind. He pushed it down. The house might be well stocked, but *everyone* was becoming more paranoid as the days went on. If it kept going like this, there might very well be a few more murders before the end of the storm.

“I haven’t,” he admitted. “But, Tabitha, do you really think it’s *likely*? Daniel is a good man. He’s your sister’s husband. He—”

“I know nothing about him,” Tabitha said in a higher pitch than usual. “He could have killed a thousand people for all I know—and you could just be protecting him!”

Whatever was upsetting her was making her behave like this, but Reginald wasn’t in any mood to respond fairly. His own anger and fear and defensiveness burst forth as he

snapped in reply, “And your sister? I don’t suppose you’ve questioned dear, sweet, innocent Laura yet, have you?”

“Laura would never hurt anyone!”

Tabitha told him angrily. “How dare you! She doesn’t even have a strong enough motive to want him gone.”

“How dare *you!*” he snarled back. “Laura is just as likely to harm Barton as my friend is, and I know even less about her. She would not be the first woman to be deadly after

pretending to be innocent.”

“Ah, so you think that because she is a *woman*, she is crazy enough to kill!” Tabitha demanded.

“That isn’t what I said at all!” Reginald was becoming exasperated now. “But you make a fine point—after all, *she* is not the dangerous sister.”

There was a pause, and Reginald knew that he’d gone a step too far. Despite this, his

anger overwhelmed his common sense, and he refused to look away when she met his eyes.

“*I’m dangerous?*” Tabitha practically spat. “*Me?* When would I have had the time to do this crime, or better yet ask someone else to do it on my behalf? You do not see me in line to inherit an entire business if my stubborn partner would just die!”

The silence that fell this time was thicker as they stared hard at each other, the implications of what they’d both just said

filling the air thick enough to smother them where they stood.

“So that’s it,” Reginald said quietly.

“That’s why you have been behaving in such a strange and distant manner. You think me a murderer, killing for profit.”

“And you,” Tabitha replied in barely a whisper, “suspect me a madwoman who kills for a story.”

Reginald didn’t think that, of course, but

he couldn't deny that it had crossed his mind. He didn't know *what* to think anymore. Each possibility seemed less likely than the last.

But Tabitha . . . he could see it in her expression. Tabitha genuinely wasn't sure whether or not Reginald was the killer. It shouldn't have come to him as such a shock nor hurt him as much as it did. She'd known him only a few days—she barely knew him from Adam.

And yet, I thought we had a special

connection. I thought something real was already forming between us, untainted by fear and superstition.

He'd been wrong, though. He saw that now. A quick glance back at Tabitha saw tears forming in her eyes, and he knew that he couldn't bear them. He looked away once more and said, "Well. I suggest that we perhaps stop taking tea together for a while, Miss Oakley."

He heard her sniff and swallow behind

him. "I . . . think that this might be for the best, Mr. Hatcher," she replied.

Reginald stared down at the table, not saying a word. Eventually, he heard the scraping of the chair that meant she was getting to her feet. He didn't look up until he'd heard the door open and close again, taking her away with it.

Laura knew that her husband hadn't

killed Mr. Barton. She knew that Reginald probably had his doubts, and that Tabitha definitely did, but Laura knew for sure. It wasn't just because she loved him, but also because of an offer she had made.

They were sitting together alone one evening when it happened. Reginald had clearly been avoiding Daniel for a few days now, and Daniel had been ranting to Laura about it—showing his emotions through outrage in what Laura sometimes thought was the only way men knew.

“He suspects me, I know he does,” Daniel told her. “You mark my words; if the road was open, I’d be awaiting trial just now.”

“I’m sure Reginald does not suspect you,” Laura lied, placing a comforting hand on her husband’s shoulder.

Daniel shook his head. “No. *I’d* suspect me; with everything I’ve said and how open I am in my hatred of Barton. I just . . . I’m angry that Reg hasn’t even tried to talk to me about

it. He's so dead certain that I'm a murderer that he won't even look me in the eye like a man."

Laura took a deep breath. She'd been waiting for this conversation since they'd found Barton's body, and now it was time at last to bring it to the fore. "Danny," she said, deliberately using his nickname to more securely grab his attention. "Danny, my love, will you be honest with me?"

"Until death does part us, if you recall,"

Daniel replied, quirking an eyebrow. How handsome he was! How confident and charming.

Laura steeled herself. “Did you murder Mr. Barton?” she asked.

Daniel said nothing.

Quickly, Laura continued. “If so, do not mistake me. I would not misunderstand. He was a horrid man by all accounts, and the world may indeed be better without his

presence. If you did kill him, however, we must discuss our next moves.”

Daniel tilted his head. “What does that mean?” he asked guardedly. “Would you turn me in?”

“Turn you in?” Laura repeated. “Good God. Of course not. You’re my husband, and I would not allow your life to be ruined for the sake of *Barton*.” She gave him a serious look, hoping he understood. “I love you, and if you did this, I cannot call it just, but I will stand

by your side.”

“How?” Daniel asked her.

Laura’s thoughts were racing. She was barely aware of what she was saying, barely cognizant of where the conversation had turned, but she only knew that she must keep going. Daniel was important to her, and right as she spoke, she meant every word. “Well, we’ll have to leave England, of course,” she said. “It’s not my preference, but it isn’t too difficult for a young man of stature to secure a

job in the colonies. A few bribes to the right people and the Roberts could ‘fall overboard’ en route to America, and we could live new lives with new names.”

“Laura . . .” Daniel started.

“It will be hard at first,” Laura mused.

“For you will not be able to practice law, and I shall have to lose some of my creature comforts, but I am sure we’ll manage. We’ll have to delay children for a few years, but I don’t mind too much about that—we’ll have

our family eventually. Oh, and I suppose I shall have to make Tabitha aware in some way. It will be tragic not to be able to see my parents again, but—”

“Laura,” Daniel said again, more firmly.

“Stop. I can’t—please listen.”

Laura closed her mouth at last and looked at him. “What is it, darling? Would you prefer to go to the East Indies? I suppose I could pick up another language . . .”

Daniel chuckled, then, to Laura's surprise, pulled her into an embrace. "You impossible woman," he said, hugging her tight. "I did *not* kill Barton."

"Oh!" Laura said. She leaned into his embrace, and relief flooded through her. "Oh, thank God. Darling, I did *not* want to give up my life. I've only just started to enjoy it."

The two of them laughed and kissed and embraced, Laura almost unbalanced in her giddiness and relief.

Eventually, Daniel pulled away and looked over her face. “Would you *really* have thrown everything away for me if I confessed to this murder? I’m humbled by the mere suggestion.”

“I . . . I think so,” Laura admitted nervously. She couldn’t believe what she was saying, but at the same time, it seemed like the only sensible thing to say. “Barton was a terrible man. And I love you.”

Now, a couple of days later, Laura considered the offer in her mind, playing the conversation over again for the millionth time. *Had* she truly meant such an insane offer?

I think I truly did. How exhilarating. And terrifying.

She believed him, though; she believed that he had not killed Barton. He had no reason now to lie to her. She just thanked God that she never needed to know for sure how it would have ended if he had.

“Laura?” Daniel asked her now. She looked up and smiled at him.

“Yes, my love?” she asked.

“About the conversation we had the other day,” he said. “I’ve been thinking a lot about it. There are two important things that I think we need to discuss if you’re willing.”

Laura shifted nervously in her seat. “I’m listening,” she replied.

Daniel ran a hand through his hair, and then drummed his fingers on the table, a thoughtful look in his eye as if he was trying hard to put together exactly what he wanted to say. Eventually, he nodded to himself and said, “First, I need to know something. Do not worry, you won’t be getting anyone into trouble, and I intend to talk to Reg myself, but . . . are you the only one who suspects me?”

Laura hesitated. She did not want to hurt him, but she didn’t want to lie to him either.

“No,” she admitted at last. “I do not think that anyone seriously thinks you have committed the crime, but neither have you been counted amongst the innocent.”

Daniel grimaced. “I thought so,” he said. “Never mind. I shall deal with that myself. I have something else to discuss, something much more important.”

More important than the implication that your best friend thinks you may be a murderer?

“What is it?” she asked cautiously. “If it’s about the offer I made . . .”

He shook his head. “Only in part. Now, listen here, Laura. You told me that if we were to flee, then we would have to delay having children. It isn’t something we’ve spoken much about, but is that something you want in the near future?”

Laura stared at him. “I . . . well, truthfully, Danny, I’ve wanted to be a mother since Tabitha was born and my mother first

placed her in my lap. I knew that you wanted to focus on your career before children came along, however, and I knew that we didn't know each other particularly well yet, so I just never mentioned it. You needn't worry—"

"Stop," Daniel said. "When this is all over, what do you say we give it a try?"

"You're serious?" she asked in surprise.

"You want to have a baby?"

Daniel laughed. "You'll be the one doing

most of the work, my love,” he said. “But yes. I can’t think of any sin greater than depriving a child of the chance to have you as a mother. Let’s do it.”

Happiness—real, genuine happiness to a degree she’d not felt since her wedding day—flooded Laura then, soaking her from head to toe in joy. A baby! In just a few days, they’d gone from uncertain about their marriage to confident enough to become international fugitives and now, they were discussing a child.

“I . . . Daniel, is it quite terrible of me to say that I think Mr. Barton’s death is the best thing to ever happen to me?” Laura asked. She instantly felt guilty and promised to say an extra prayer for voicing the thought the next time she went to church, but she couldn’t quite deny its veracity.

Daniel seemed to find her words terribly amusing. “Laura, I’d be a hypocrite if I said so,” he replied with a grin. He put on a look of mock-seriousness then and said, “Why? Did

you kill him just to straighten out our lives?”

“What a terrible suggestion!” Laura exclaimed, reaching over to swat his arm.

“Really, you’ll get me into trouble one day with your so-called sense of humor. I hardly think I have the capacity to murder.”

“Oh, please,” Daniel replied, wrapping his arms around her. “You were ready to discard your entire life to live a false life and protect me. You can do anything you put your mind to.”

Laura gasped, laughing at the pretend seriousness in his voice. “What an awful conversation this is! Oh, Daniel, is it wrong that we should be experiencing such joy in the wake of a man’s death? Even a man as terrible as Barton was a man—and now he’s dead.”

“He is,” Daniel replied. “But he’s given us a wonderful gift.”

“A gift?” Laura asked, leaning her head onto his shoulder.

“Yes,” he replied. He kissed her gently.

“By dying and trapping us all here in whatever sick game he wanted to play, he’s finally shown us how to live.”

Chapter 16

Mala Fide

I pause this book, dear reader, to remind you how lucky you are to read it as a work of fiction. For those involved in the terrible intrigue surrounding the death of Mr. Blake, the emotions were more virulent and deadly than the storm outside the window. Mr. Sharpe knew that no matter what happened, he and the other guests would leave something of themselves behind forever.

Excerpt from *Death in a Storm* (1818) by T.

Oakley, p. 292

Avoiding Reginald when she wasn't

allowed to leave the manor was difficult. Even in as large a house as this, it was nearly impossible. Tabitha managed for several days, however, by taking refuge in the empty room she'd once shared with Lady Wells.

The effect that her suspicion was having on her was so marked that even Laura had begged her to just speak with Reginald, but she couldn't bring herself to do it. She felt nervous and jumpy, and every noise or movement had her half-convinced that the killer was coming for her, too. She'd barely

slept, and now she'd barely eaten anything in a couple of days, too.

At least, Tabitha thought, on the fourth day of this, I am getting more writing done than I ever have.

She'd been drawing up some character profiles, partly to help her out, but also partly to apply her findings to the real investigation. As far as she knew, they were no closer to discovering the murderer than they had been a week ago, and the storm would not last much

longer. If they didn't find something, and soon, there was a good chance that Barton's killer would walk free.

She had narrowed her suspects down to four after a discussion with Laura had convinced her that Daniel was not on the list.

First was the indomitable Mrs. Payne. Her refusal to outright answer any question which Miss Willoughby and Mr. Sharpe had thrown in her direction was perhaps a little too obvious, but that didn't clear her from suspicion. Like all suspects, she held a personal grudge against the victim—but more than any of them, she

seemed to hold the dead man in contempt. Miss Willoughby found that she believed that, should it be revealed that Mrs. Payne had killed Mr. Blake, the woman would expect a round of raucous applause.

Tabitha considered the words, a frown on her face. It would fit neatly—but perhaps a little too neatly. After all, in the real world, Mrs. Paddington had no reason to be so openly hateful if she actually committed the crime.

Second came Mr. Graves. The victim's former best friend was perhaps the most wronged of any. Miss Willoughby included him on the list only because of the

affair between Blake and Graves's wife, but she doubted that he was truly the killer. After all, the most egregious of Blake's crimes against Graves had only been revealed after the murder.

Tabitha stopped briefly here too. She could not have imagined how painful it must have been for Grisham to discover that his own son was actually fathered by Barton. She found that she had come to admire him for how he had reacted, and though he was still a suspect, she sincerely hoped that he was not the guilty party.

Third, of course, was Lady Shaft. She was not above murder—she had all but admitted as much to Miss Willoughby only a few days before. In fact, she had fully intended to murder Blake in his bed. But why, at the last moment, would she switch from knife to poison? Was confessing her murderous intent a double-bluff of sorts, to throw off suspicion?

Truthfully, Lady Wells still seemed the most likely candidate to Tabitha. The regal woman thought herself above everyone else, and probably would have no problem killing off someone who had wronged her. It was

fairly damning, in Tabitha's opinion, how quickly the woman had been willing to move into Barton's room and possess some of his personal effects.

Tabitha's fingers trembled as she dipped her pen once more and began to write the fourth paragraph.

The last suspect, of course, was almost too painful for Miss Willoughby to bear. Mr. Sharpe had been her companion through this harrowing journey, and to think he may be a murderer was tearing at her very heart and

soul. How devastating it would be to her if he had led her on a merry dance of deceit! Worse, he had accused her of involvement. Serious or not, the accusation stung her more than she could admit. She had thought he knew her better than this. She had thought they might be falling in love.

Tabitha crossed out the last few lines as quickly as she wrote them, angry at herself for allowing such sentimentality. The truth was that she knew that Reginald's accusation had been a heat of the moment defense and that he didn't really suspect her, but what he had said still bothered her.

More than that, though, she knew that she had to confront him about her own suspicions. She did not want to believe that he was guilty, but she also knew that she would not get any mental rest until she was absolutely certain.

“Absolutely certain!” she exclaimed out loud, despair drowning her tone. “What is certainty anymore? I cannot bring myself to confront him, yet I cannot turn away!”

The worst thing about all of this—worse than the death, worse than the suspicion and intrigue, worse even than the strange feeling in her heart when she thought of Reginald right now—was a part of her soul she felt would never return.

No matter what happened next, Tabitha wasn't sure how she was ever going to trust again.

“Reggie!” Daniel called from behind.

Reginald spun to see his friend hurrying along the corridor toward him. Daniel’s arrival was accompanied by a twist of guilt in Reginald’s stomach—he’d been avoiding the other man ever since suspicion had wormed its way into his brain.

“Daniel,” Reginald greeted, forcing some semblance of normalcy into his tone. “I didn’t realize you were in this hallway.”

“I wasn’t,” Daniel said bluntly. “I

followed you here. We need to talk, Reg.”

Reginald folded his arms and nodded.

Daniel was right. There was no avoiding this, no matter the outcome. The few days of suspicion had already been torturing enough.

“Laura told me that there have been questions,” Daniel said, mirroring Reginald’s pose. “Tell me the truth. Am I a suspect for you?”

Reginald hesitated. He longed to say that

no, of course not—but Daniel deserved the truth. “You have to know how it looks.”

Daniel grimaced, and Reginald saw a flash of pain and disappointment in his eyes. However, he then nodded and said, “I understand. And now you must question me.”

“What?”

“Question me, Reginald. Isn’t that what you’ve been doing with everyone else?” Daniel asked. His expression was impassive, and

Reginald couldn't even begin to guess what his friend was feeling.

“Are you truly going to make me do this?” Reginald asked. He waited, but Daniel didn't answer—just stared at him, waiting. Reginald sighed and said, “All right, then. Where were you the night Barton died?”

“Technically it was absurdly early in the morning,” Daniel replied. “You must get the details correct.”

“You *have* to know that comments like this don’t make you look any more innocent, Danny,” Reginald said in frustration. “You’re a man of the law.”

“And so are you,” Daniel replied. “And I am not your first obstinate witness. Do your job, solicitor.”

I’m not a criminal lawyer. I just deal with money.

But the few classes he had managed to

take on the career path he'd really wanted flooded his mind now. The criminal justice lectures with Daniel by his side, laughing excitedly about how they were going to take justice to the next level. The mock trial where Daniel and Reginald had worked together and broken the professor's record.

And the day that Reginald's father died, when Daniel switched career paths just to keep his friend from being alone.

What was I thinking? This man is a good

man, and he's my friend. If he killed Barton, there's only one question I have to ask to find out the truth.

“Daniel,” Reginald said. “As my best friend, my brother, I ask you to be honest. Did you kill Barton?”

Finally, Daniel's mask broke into something closer to a smile. “At last,” Daniel said. “No. I didn't. I hated the man; I freely admit it. I am not sad to see him in the ground, and I applaud whoever put him there.

I won't deny it; I even fantasized about doing it a few times. But, Reg, I could never go through with it. I was nowhere near him when he died."

Both men looked at each other for a moment. Daniel held Reginald's gaze and didn't even blink. Finally, Reginald nodded. "I believe you," he said truthfully. The relief bubbled up inside him, but he didn't get to enjoy it for very long before frustration took its place.

Outside, the thunder crashed.

“I can’t believe that storm is still raging,” Daniel observed. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Cursed thing,” Reginald said in a low voice. “If it would just *stop*, the inspector could get here and solve this for us. I’m *exhausted*, Danny.”

Daniel patted him on the back. “Let’s go get a drink,” he said. “And I can tell you all

about what Laura said to me the other day . .

.”

They did just that. Daniel and Reginald sat together in their room, sipping on whiskey while Daniel described Laura’s willingness to throw away her whole life for him when she believed him a killer.

“I mean, what did I do to deserve a woman like that?” Daniel asked for perhaps

the fourth time. “When we get out of here, I must treat her more as a husband should. We never really courted—do you think I should buy her the trinkets and take her to the places I would have if we did?”

Reginald smiled. He’d been surprised when Daniel told him about Laura’s offer, but the more he thought about it, the more the whole thing seemed right to him. Strange as it was, quick as it had all been, Laura and Daniel had found each other and were somehow *perfect* for one another.

*Danny told me he knew that he loved her
from the first time they met. Is such a thing
possible?*

He thought he'd discovered it was, but
now it seemed he'd been mistaken. He knew it
was irrational to even entertain the thought
that he'd fallen in love with Tabitha at first
glance, but he couldn't deny a draw there
which kept calling him back to her like a siren
calls to a sailor.

But if she is a siren, then I am Odysseus. I must bind myself away or block my ears, for she thinks me a murderer.

Just like he had suspected Daniel only moments before, if he was honest, but he did not want to think about that. His injured pride insisted that the two situations were different—and besides, she hadn't even done him the decency of *asking*.

“You’re thinking about Tabitha, aren’t you?” Daniel said, sounding faintly amused.

“Laura told me about your argument. You understand that you are both behaving perfectly ridiculously, don’t you?”

“I am not—” Reginald started.

“You accused her of killing a man for the sake of a book,” Daniel said flatly.

Reginald scowled. “I was angry. I didn’t mean it.”

“Don’t tell *me* that. Tell her,” Daniel said.

“And soon, please. This is almost embarrassing to watch, and I say that as a friend who cares for you dearly. You’ve both behaved unfairly—so fix it.”

Reginald stared at him for a moment then sighed. Annoyed, he turned on his heel and began to march away.

“Where are you going?” Daniel called after him.

Reginald didn’t even look back. “To fix it,

curse you.”

The last thing he heard before he turned the corner was Daniel’s laughter. When he was safely out of sight, though, Reginald’s angry façade faded, and he at last allowed himself a tiny smile.

Chapter 17

Consensus Ad Idem

Miss Willoughby knew that the hardest thing about an investigation was that sometimes one would discover they had followed entirely the wrong track. The storm was still crashing outside, and usually on discovering an error her mood would match it. Today, however, she'd never been happier to be wrong.

Excerpt from *Death in a Storm* (1818) by T.

Oakley, p. 306

Tabitha opened the door seconds before
Reginald would have knocked. She'd been

intending to go to find him and finally talk this out, but instead she came face to face with him, both wearing matching expressions of surprise.

“Laura told me I could find you here,” Reginald said after a pause, glancing behind Tabitha. She just hoped he didn’t see what a disarray of papers was scattered across the floor of the twin bedroom. “Er . . . I’m sorry to disturb you. May I come in?”

“I . . . yes, of course,” Tabitha replied.

It was dark outside, and not just because of the storm. The rain had let up a little, and there hadn't been a crash in quite some time, though the gloom still hung over the night sky. For the first time in a week, though, Tabitha could see the moonlight.

She showed Reginald to a chair and the two of them sat together in an awkward silence. Tabitha watched the candlelight flicker, growing more embarrassed by the second by her memories of their last

encounter. The way she had acted was *not* befitting of the woman she had become, and though she could blame part of it on their confinement and the unsettled atmosphere of the house, she knew that didn't excuse all of it.

“I'm sorry.”

Tabitha blinked. She and Reginald had spoken the exact same words at the same time.

“You're sorry?” she asked. “My behavior

was . . .”

“Not as bad as mine,” Reginald finished.

“I understand why you were suspicious. I myself just confronted Daniel, a man I trust more than anyone in the world. You have only known me a week; it’s no wonder that you suspected me in the crime.”

Tabitha felt her cheeks redden and was glad that they were disguised by the candlelight. “I still should have handled the whole thing more gracefully. There was no

need to get so defensive about Laura, or speak to you so harshly.”

“Well, I shall accept your apology if you will accept mine,” Reginald replied with a little half-smile. “Do you still suspect that I might have been involved in Barton’s death?”

Tabitha wanted to say no, but instead she found herself shaking her head in frustration. “I will not lie to you, Reginald. I don’t know *what* to believe anymore.”

Reginald nodded, and Tabitha was surprised to realize that this had probably been the answer he expected. Unexpectedly, he reached out and took both of her hands in his. Tabitha was shocked by the gesture, but she made no move to pull away. She found she actually felt rather comforted by the warmth of his hands around hers.

“Tabitha,” Reginald said seriously, leaning close and staring directly into her eyes. “I did not kill Barton. I do not know who killed him, or why exactly they chose now to

do it, but I swear on the grave of my father that it wasn't me. Nor was it Daniel."

Tabitha met his gaze, and staring back at her she saw only truth. Suddenly she felt the overwhelming urge to cry, though she didn't understand why. She managed to keep it inside as she whispered, "I believe you."

That smile! It was dark and gloomy outside, and the room was barely lit by the candles, but Reginald's smile could have illuminated the entire building by itself. It was

brighter than the stars, brighter than the sun
itself, and just as radiant.

*How could I ever have suspected this man of
murder?*

“Thank you,” Reginald said, squeezing
her hands. “For your trust. I cannot begin to
explain to you how much it means.”

“I think I can hazard a guess,” Tabitha
replied. She suddenly felt unbearably shy in a
way she hadn’t since she was just a little girl.

She was also very acutely aware all of a sudden that they were entirely alone.

The thought seemed to occur to Reginald at the same time, for a look of mild embarrassment crossed his face and he dropped her hands, pulling away.

“Oh, you don’t need to—” Tabitha started before she could stop herself.

“I do,” Reginald replied. Was it Tabitha’s imagination, or was his voice suddenly a little

hoarse? “Since we are being truthful, I shall tell you why. If I didn’t move away from you, Miss Tabitha Oakley, I rather think I would have been driven mad by the temptation to kiss you.”

What!

Tabitha’s eyes shot open and her pulse quickened so rapidly that she thought her heart might beat out of her very chest. She knew that there was a bond there—he had asked to call on her, after all—but to think

that he was as attracted to her as all this? She didn't know if she was more embarrassed or flattered, but either way the primary emotion was more flustered than anything else.

“You wish to kiss me?” Tabitha asked cautiously.

“Very much,” Reginald admitted. “But I am aware how improper that would be. We should not even be alone together. Forgive me, I shouldn't have said anything.”

“I’m glad you did,” Tabitha said quickly.

The air around her felt thick and heady, and her mind seemed strangely caught between a daze and a new kind of clarity. She knew that if she stopped to think too hard about her next words, she may ruin this strange atmosphere, and she knew instinctively that she must avoid that at all costs. “And, well . . . as you so rightly point out, we shouldn’t be alone together. But we are.”

“Yes, you’re right,” Reginald replied. “I should leave.”

“No!” Tabitha said, reaching out and grabbing his hand. “No, no. That isn’t what I meant. Rather, I was thinking that, since we’re being improper *anyway* . . .”

Reginald looked directly at her once more, the surprise evident on his face. “I . . . are you suggesting . . .?”

She shrugged. “I don’t see why not.”

“Well,” Reginald replied, stepping

forward. “When you put it like that . . .”

Then his arms were around her and gently—ever so gently—he pressed his lips against hers. Slowly, he deepened the kiss, and Tabitha returned it with more enthusiasm than she’d known she could muster.

When the kiss was over and they pulled apart, they both found themselves giggling. Tabitha felt like a schoolgirl, the joy inside her young and fresh and *new*. She and Reginald leaned their foreheads together, just enjoying

the time together for a few moments before they acknowledged that everything had changed once again.

“Do you hear that?” Reginald said after a while.

“I don’t hear anything,” Tabitha mumbled.

“Exactly.”

Simultaneously, they both straightened

up and headed to the window. The moon shone more brightly now, casting her bright essence over the valley like a soothing blanket. Tabitha could dimly make out the flooded areas that made travel impossible, but as she stared, she realized that the water wasn't moving. She glanced up at the sky, at the thinning clouds, and then focused on the windowpane before her where nothing was pattering against the glass.

“Reginald,” she gasped.

“I know,” he said. He put his arms around her waist from behind, and they stood in that embrace together, looking out onto a promise of an end to the chaos.

At last, the storm had subsided.

The next day, when she met Reginald for breakfast after bidding him goodnight not long after the rain's end, Tabitha came armed with several stacks of paper. Most of it was from

her manuscript or the plans surrounding it, though some were more plain notes taken throughout the course of their investigation.

“You have been busy,” Reginald remarked, placing some fruit and a steaming hot cup of tea in front of her.

She smiled at his thoughtfulness and nodded. “I have,” she agreed. “I thought I would show you some of the conclusions I came to in our days apart.”

Together, they leafed through the notes. Reginald occasionally commented on her findings here and there, and even occasionally stopped to praise her. Tabitha did her best to hide it, but every time he did so she felt as if she was glowing.

It took them around an hour and a half to go through most of the notes, and when they were done, Tabitha realized that she was no closer to a solution than she had been before.

“It’s so frustrating!” she exclaimed. “How

are we supposed to proceed when everyone is evasive and keeps pushing us in circles?”

“I know,” Reginald said unhappily.

“Should we question the servants again?

Maybe they saw or overheard something and did not wish to tell us when we last spoke.”

Tabitha shrugged at the suggestion just as

Alice came in to refill their tea.

“Do you need anything else?” she asked as her eyes darted from Tabitha to Reginald.

Tabitha noticed that her eyes would

occasionally look at the papers on the table, but it was a look of curiosity. “Alice, do you think any of the other servants could be hiding more information about the guests or the Grishams’ dealings with Mr. Barton?”

Alice gave her a quizzical look before responding, “I don’t know. As I stated beforehand, I haven’t been in employment here for that long to know of everything they know. All I know is that Mr. Barton was not a well-liked man and that many feel that his death is a blessing. All those poor girls he

harm. If I may be so bold, I do not think anyone in this house cares that he is gone. No one will have to suffer at his hands again.”

That last statement was said with such a cold expression that both Tabitha and Reginald were taken aback by how open Alice had been. “I am sorry. I spoke out of turn.”

“It’s alright Alice,” said Reginald with a sympathetic smile. “We understand that everyone had a quarrel with that man. You are lucky that you never had to encounter him.”

Alice gave a quick nod in agreement before excusing herself from them. Tabitha gave her own smile of understanding before turning back to Reginald.

“Well, that makes this even harder now. The other servants will mostly likely not want to cooperate, especially if they feel that the death was justified. Perhaps we can come back to the idea of questioning them again,” said Tabitha as she sipped her tea.

“We could question Lady Wells again, I

suppose, but it won't bring us much luck either. It's almost a shame that Grisham didn't know about the ongoing affair or about his son until *after* Barton's death. Otherwise, he'd be the perfect candidate."

Perhaps a little too much of a shame.

"Reginald," Tabitha said slowly. "What if he did know about Scott? What if he found out about the affair and the baby and all of that and kept it to himself until the opportunity struck?"

Reginald's eyes widened. "And then Barton asked to throw a party in his home, and Grisham suddenly had the perfect opportunity. He knew that everyone here hated Barton; he knew that everyone had a motive to see him dead and that suspicion would fall on all of us!"

"Yes!" Tabitha exclaimed. She probably shouldn't be so excited, but the taste of an unraveled mystery was too tantalizing to resist. "Perhaps his intention was even to place

the blame on his wife as a way of punishing her for her indiscretions and to keep the truth from the son.”

They stared at each other for a moment, and then Reginald said, “Tabitha, I think we’ve cracked the case.”

“I agree,” she said. “It makes the most sense out of any of the theories we’ve discussed so far. But what do we do next?”

“Well,” Reginald said. “The rain has

stopped so . . . probably nothing much at all.

He's unlikely to kill again, so it's probably safer for both of us if we continue to act as if we know nothing. When the inspector arrives, we can tell him everything we know and the arrest can go ahead without us."

"That could be days," Tabitha said nervously. "The flooding still has to dry up."

Reginald took her hand over the table. "I know," he said. "But it has already been a week and he's done nothing more. All we need

to do is keep it to ourselves for a few more days. Can you do that?

Tabitha took a deep breath, but nodded.

“Yes,” she said. “If we do it together.”

Barton’s killer only became nervous for the first time when the rain finally stopped. The questioning from the lawyer and the writer hadn’t bothered them at all, but as the day the inspector would arrive came closer,

they began to wonder if their crime had really been as perfect as it had seemed.

Crime. As if it was a crime to remove such a stain from the world.

The crime for murder was hanging, and the person who killed Barton didn't find that particularly harsh. However, they also didn't see themselves as a murderer. In some ways, they were the opposite.

How many more young women would

have suffered at Barton's hands if his life hadn't ended here? How many marriages would have been ruined, how many businessmen driven to their deaths, if the killer hadn't decided to act?

They'd expected that, as the week passed, what they had done would sink in. They'd expected to break under questioning, or simply under the weight of their own guilt. Instead, they felt proud.

They say that vengeance is sweet. I disagree.

Vengeance is neither sweet nor bitter.

No. They were not joyful any more than they were sad. Instead, they felt content. Their whole life had been leading to this moment, and now at last it was over. In a way, it felt as if they weren't sure what they were supposed to do next.

The killer sighed and lay back on their bed. If only imprisonment was on the line, they would have accepted it gladly if it meant ridding the world of Barton. But they did not

want to die—they *would* not hang for his sake.

“I’m not afraid to die,” they mumbled.

“But not for him. Never for him.”

So, what was there to do? Should they wait for the inspector and simply hope that their actions were never discovered? Should they try to make a run for it now, while nobody was watching?

They glanced at the picture on their bedside, the little portrait they carried with

them everywhere they went. “What do you think?” they asked the figure. “Should we run?”

No. I will not leave this house until the end of this story. Besides, I have nowhere to run.

That left one real option—a terrifying option. They could not trust the men in charge of law in this world. After all, if they could, a man like Barton would never have been allowed to flourish in the first place. The lawmakers were not interested in truth or

justice, only lining their own pockets and cozying up to the monsters who funded their positions in the first place while hardworking people of all classes suffered.

“But I do not want to be responsible for any more deaths,” they told the portrait.

“Which I will be if someone is arrested for my crime. I cannot be caught, and I cannot hide—and so I must find a way to confess and remain free.”

Impossible as it sounded, impossible as it

seemed, Barton's killer knew that it was their only chance of achieving a happy ending to this tale. They were trapped like a rat in a cage, no way out except if they could somehow convince someone to open the door for them.

It was a risky plan, and one which would take a few days to put together. They'd need to choose their time and target carefully, and they'd need to do it in such a way that they were able to get the whole story out.

“Is it even possible?” they asked the portrait. “Do you think so? The slightest misstep will have me with a noose around my neck.”

All the killer wanted to do was return to their life as it had once been. Back when they’d known happiness, before Barton ruined everything. It was *his* fault that it had come to this—his fault that the killer had become such in the first place. It hurt to think that their life could have been so much different if it wasn’t for that vile creature’s interference.

He's dead. He's dead and gone.

And whatever happened next, they could survive. So long as they remembered that truth, no consequence could be as bad as knowing that Barton still lived.

Chapter 18

Ipsso Jure

Mr. Sharpe was unsure if this case would ever really end. So much had changed since its beginning that it was impossible to see a way out. Even when the inspector arrived and Mr. Sharpe and Miss Willoughby were given leave to hang up their hats, Mr. Sharpe knew that he could not let it go. No matter what the result, this murder would haunt him for a long, long time.

Excerpt from *Death in a Storm* (1818) by T.

Oakley, p. 351

It took another three days for the

inspector and the constables to arrive.

Reginald was pleased to see that the inspector who was handling the case was a man that he knew; Inspector Claude Eldridge, son of a French mother and English father, had attended school with him.

The minute Claude laid eyes on Reginald and Daniel, he chuckled. “How is it that when there’s trouble, I find you two at the scene?”

Reginald snorted. “That happened *twice*,” he said. He saw a number of raised eyebrows

from the other gathered guests who had been trapped in Grisham's house with him, but he felt no need to elaborate. In fact, it rather amused him to keep the mystery to himself.

“We're glad that you're here, Inspector,” Laura said. “It's been quite the long week and a half. My husband, Reginald, and my sister have been working hard to get to the bottom of this.”

“As has Laura,” Daniel added, putting his arm around her. “Though I confess, Reg and

Tabitha did most of the work. The two are quite the pair.”

“The *nosy* pair,” Mrs. Grisham replied.

Reginald glanced at her and saw that the woman’s eyes were red, as if she’d been crying. “Prying secrets out of all of us that would have been better left hidden.”

“I disagree,” Mrs. Paddington said, shooting her a waspish look. “Some things are better *out in the open*.”

Reginald wondered what, exactly, Mrs. Paddington knew about what had happened when they questioned the Grishams, and decided it would be better not to ask. A fire blazed between these two women, and the idea of stepping into it was akin to dousing himself in oil.

“I have copious notes on all the conclusions that Reginald and I have come to in the course of our investigation, as well as several statements from each of the suspects,” Tabitha told the inspector. “If you like, we’d

be happy to show them to you.”

“Alone,” Reginald added quickly, seeing Lady Wells’ eyes narrow. “Come, there is a small drawing room nearby where we can discuss.”

The inspector considered then nodded. He turned to the constables and muttered some orders, then gestured for Reginald to go ahead. As the three of them walked toward the drawing room, Reginald felt the eyes of each of Barton’s guests on him, and even though he

now suspected he knew the truth, it sent a cold shiver down his spine.

Even if Mr. Grisham is the killer as we have concluded, almost everyone else in this house is dangerous.

It was a chilling thought, and one which he thought may never leave his mind again.

“I thought you’d left criminal law behind,

Reginald,” Claude said as the three of them sat at the table in the small drawing room. “Aren’t you an estate lawyer these days?”

“I’m a financial solicitor,” Reginald corrected. “But I was the closest thing to an investigator we had, and we have been trapped in this house for close to two weeks.”

“He’s been invaluable,” Tabitha said. “He managed to take control of the situation and calm everyone, and our interviews have been remarkably orderly.” She smiled at Reginald,

causing his heart to tighten in his chest. “I think it might be prudent for him to reconsider his career choices, in fact.”

“Is that right? It’s always nice when a woman talks so surely,” the inspector replied. “Are you Reginald’s wife?”

To Reginald’s secret delight, Tabitha blushed at that. “I’m not,” she said. “We’re friends. We’ve been working together on the case, and—”

Claude interrupted. “Adorable. It’s like when my son tries on my hat and pretends to be an inspector.” He glanced at the pot of tea waiting in the corner which one of the maids had dropped off before hurrying out. “Fetch us a cup of tea like a good lass, won’t you?”

Reginald raised his eyebrows in surprise, and Tabitha narrowed her eyes.

This man does not know what dangerous territory he has just entered.

Tabitha then put on perhaps the falsest smile that Reginald had ever seen and, in a poisonously airy voice, said, “Why, of course! What else would I be good for, anyway?”

She headed over to the teapot, avoiding Reginald’s eyes. Claude didn’t seem to notice that anything was amiss, and instead turned back to Reginald.

“So, what have we got? You have a suspect?” Claude demanded.

“Er, yes,” Reginald replied. He glanced at Tabitha again, but she was deliberately not looking back at them, busying herself with the teapot. “We strongly suspect Mr. Grisham, though each person had a motive. You see . . .”

He went on to explain everything that he and Tabitha had discovered together, describing each encounter with the suspects as well as a full picture of what had occurred the night of the murder.

Every time he delivered a conclusion, he made sure to emphasize Tabitha's input and ingenuity. She seemed to appreciate it, as when she sat back down at the table, she shot him a smile every time he did it, but Claude just brushed over it each time. Every time Tabitha tried to add something, the inspector either condescendingly praised her or just spoke over her completely.

Reginald found himself getting angrier and angrier. He hadn't known Claude *that* well, but he'd assumed him a better man than

this.

“All right, I’ve heard enough,” Claude said eventually. “I agree with you that Mr. Grisham is the most likely suspect, but I wouldn’t be doing my job if I didn’t hold my own investigation anyway. I’m going to re-question all of the suspects while my constables sweep the house for anything you might have missed.”

“I expected as much,” Reginald said with a nod. “But—”

“You’re welcome to come along on the questioning,” Claude continued. “These people have come to know you in the last week and a half. They may be more willing to be open with you than they are with a stranger like myself.”

“And Tabitha?” Reginald asked pointedly. “She’s as much a part of this as I am.”

“That’s nice,” Claude said with a quick,

dismissive glance at Tabitha. “But this is a serious investigation, and I won’t bring a woman into it.”

“If women are so incapable and helpless, then perhaps you could save yourself some time by not bothering to question the female suspects,” Tabitha replied through gritted teeth.

Claude laughed. “She has fire! Don’t worry your head, little lady. I’ll get to the bottom of this and you can go back to your

doilies and such.”

“I’d appreciate it if you would stop being condescending to my friend,” Reginald snapped. “She’s one of the most intelligent, forward thinking women—no, *people*—that I have ever met. I will not accompany you on your investigation while you—”

“No, Reginald, don’t,” Tabitha interrupted. “It’s quite all right. You and the fine inspector should go ahead.”

Reginald looked at her, a deep frown on his face. “You’re sure?” he asked.

Tabitha nodded, that false smile still in place. “Honestly, it’s probably for the best. I imagine that Inspector Eldridge and I have rather different approaches, and we wouldn’t want a clash.”

“Come along, Hatcher,” Claude said, standing and tapping his foot impatiently. “I’d like to have this investigation over in time for tea.”

Reginald was still unhappy, but he gave a stiff nod. With one last glance at Tabitha, he followed the inspector out of the room to begin what he hoped was the last round of questions on this endless mystery.

The first person to be re-interviewed was Lady Wells. She was horribly offended to be singled out—despite, as Reginald quietly pointed out, giving them more than enough

reason by displaying that knife to him and Tabitha—and made it more than known.

“I say, Inspector, I have been through this *quite* enough,” Lady Wells protested. “I came all the way here to Grisham’s horrible old house at that monster Barton’s request, and now I am to be treated like a murderer?”

“You wanted him dead,” Reginald told her.

“I did,” she said unapologetically. “For

what he did to my husband.”

“And what was that?” Claude asked.

Lady Wells pointed imperiously to the little portrait on her bedside table. “My dear husband there, he may have held the pistol—but it was Barton who killed him through his cruelty!” For a second, Reginald thought he saw tears in her eyes, but they were quickly covered by ferocity. “Which is why I am so offended that you insist on questioning me when I didn’t get to kill him in return before

someone beat me to it!”

Claude coughed, his mustache vibrating with the movement. “Now, see here, Mrs. Wells . . .” he began.

Reginald felt like a man next to a gas leak just before the flame touched it.

“Mrs. Wells?” Lady Wells asked in a voice that was somehow a scream and a whisper at the same time. “*Mrs.* Wells? How dare you! Do you know who my father was, Inspector

Eldridge? I am a member of the gentry! Just because I condescended to marry a common man does not mean that you can strip me of my rank! I shall have your job, sir. What is the name of your superior? I—”

“All right, my lady, we can deal with disciplining the inspector later,” Reginald cut in hastily. “For now, why don’t you simply tell him what he wants to know?”

“What he wants to know is some *manners*,” Lady Wells huffed. “But nonetheless,

I shall comply. I am a law-abiding citizen and a member of the aristocracy that holds this very country aloft. When I swear that I had nothing to do with Barton's death, you may take me at my word."

Claude scribbled something down in his notebook. "Thank you, Mrs. Wells. Now about your relationship with Mr. Barton . . ."

"I won't be insulted like this!" Lady Wells shrieked. "You are a terrible little man with no respect. I refuse to answer any more questions."

Hatcher, you shall represent me in the courts of justice.”

“I’m not sure that acting as though you need a lawyer is the best strategy, Lady Wells,” Reginald said mildly. “Claude, please stop tormenting the poor woman. It’s doing nothing but hindering the investigation.”

Claude tsked. “Emotional creatures, the entire lot of them. No wonder men like Barton remain unmarried.”

“Barton was unmarried because he was the scum of the earth,” Lady Wells replied.

“If you say so, Mrs. Wells,” Claude told her smugly.

Reginald sighed. This was going to take longer than he’d thought.

The rest of the questioning of each of the individual suspects panned out almost exactly

as it had before, with the added caveat that, this time, each of them was even more reticent. The addition of the inspector did not help matters; in fact, it seemed to make every person more and more anxious.

First came Joanna Paddington, who was so nervous while Reginald and Claude questioned her that at one point, she forgot her own name. Reginald tried to speak to her gently and help her remain calm, but Claude made it quite clear that he'd already dismissed her as a silly woman who didn't know

anything about two or three sentences in.

After that was Mr. Paddington, who seemed much more relaxed when his wife was not in the room with him. It was obvious that it was from him that Joanna got her special branch of thinking, and he was prone to going off on tangents that weren't really helpful in the least.

After that came Mrs. Paddington, who, if possible, was even *more* acidic than when Tabitha and Reginald had originally

questioned her. She made it clear, in no uncertain terms, that she had hated Barton but that she would never dirty her own hands with a murder.

“If I had actively wanted him dead, I would have hired a man who takes care of that sort of things, not done it at a party where I could be easily implicated,” Mrs. Paddington sniffed.

Reginald and Claude exchanged glances, and Claude frowned.

“That probably isn’t something to admit in front of an inspector,” Claude said gruffly. “You could have easily paid off one of the servants to do your dirty work?”

“Then arrest me,” Mrs. Paddington replied, sounding supremely unconcerned. “No charges will hold, as we all know. I did not kill Barton nor did I hire anyone to do so, and that, as they say, is that.”

After Mrs. Paddington, they headed to

the kitchens to question the servants again.

They were all helpful once again, but if he was honest, Reginald felt as if they were wasting their time. In fact, the whole investigation right now felt as if they were wasting their time, for reasons that he could not quite put his finger on. Every question the inspector asked made Reginald feel as if they were getting further from the truth, and, when they stopped after the kitchens for a brief discussion, Reginald hoped he'd figure out the reason sooner rather than later.

They went for Laura next, and then Daniel, both of whom were exceedingly cooperative. Irritatingly, Claude treated Daniel markedly differently than he did Laura. When they left them behind, though, the inspector did not seem to suspect either of Reginald's friends.

“Right, then,” Claude said, looking over his notes. His eyebrows were raised high on his head. “Well, would you look at that? It seems the notes that I have taken are very similar to your little lady's.”

“She belongs to nobody,” Reginald told him, folding his arms. “And I’m not surprised. *Tabitha* is a very talented analyst and writer. You should not condescend to her based purely on her gender.”

Claude snorted. “Sweet on her, are you?”

More than I ever thought was possible.

“That’s hardly the point,” Reginald replied, folding his arms. He would not deny

the truth, but neither would he allow Claude to dismiss his praise as simply based on emotion. “You said yourself her work was as good as yours, did you not? And it was through *her* work that we reached the conclusion that Mr. Grisham is the most likely killer.”

“Hm,” Claude replied, still sounding unconvinced. Cleverly, though, he didn’t put up a fight. “The Grishams, yes. Well, I think we shall visit the wife first, and then, if our investigations still line up well, the husband

shall be saved for last. Should I find that he is our most likely suspect, we will arrest him and try him for murder.”

Reginald shifted uncomfortably. “And he’ll hang?” he asked.

“Most likely. It’s officially the punishment for all murders, regardless of status,” Claude said with a shrug.

“But . . .” Reginald said hesitantly. “What if he had reason to act in such a way?”

“There’s never a reason to kill unless in self-defense. And even so, one has to prove it was so or have witnesses,” the inspector said.

Normally, Reginald would agree with him. But in this case, like with so many other aspects of it, he wasn’t sure that normal could apply.

He wasn’t even sure that he knew what normal *meant* anymore.

Chapter 19

Non Liquet

Inspector Clement Edgar was not a pleasant man, in Miss Willoughby's estimation. He was one of those sad creatures who had forgotten how to be part of society—common or otherwise—and so took out his anger in the form of condescension toward those 'lesser' than he. Nonetheless, the man was excellent at his job and, though she despised him, Miss Willoughby knew that his good favor was essential to her cause.

Excerpt from *Death in a Storm* (1818) by T.

Oakley, p. 372

Though Tabitha would never admit it to anyone, Inspector Eldridge's complete dismissal of her had bothered her quite a bit. Who, exactly, did he think he was? Dismissing her and all of her hard work simply because she was a woman!

"I mean, *really*," she mumbled to herself as she walked down a corridor. "Here we are a quarter of the way through the nineteenth century and these men still think we're stuck in the fourteenth!"

She huffed and moved on. Tabitha supposed that she would have to be questioned at some point, and Reginald too, at least as a formality. Until then, though, she had no intention of being anywhere near that insufferable man—even if it meant leaving Reginald to deal with him alone.

Tabitha's first thought was to go to her sister but, perhaps unsurprisingly, Laura was otherwise occupied. It seemed that their rekindled romance had once again temporarily blinded Laura and Daniel to anyone outside of

one another, and Tabitha, whose lips still tingled with Reginald's kiss, could not fault them for it.

And so it was that she was heading down to the kitchens, hoping to scrounge a bite to eat while she awaited her turn to be questioned.

Not that it matters. No doubt the inspector thinks me incapable, anyway.

Still grumbling to herself, she made her

way down the servant's stairway to the kitchen. It was not really meant for her, but she did not particularly want to meet with any of the other guests right now.

As she passed the servant's quarters, she heard a muffled sobbing. Tabitha could not simply walk past and allow someone to cry—and besides, her curiosity would not allow it even if her conscience was suppressed. She turned and wandered down that corridor, trying to locate the sound, before stopping outside the bedroom that she remembered was

shared by the maids.

Tabitha knocked on the door. “Is someone there?” she asked, then felt a little foolish. Of *course* someone was there, unless she thought that Grisham’s home was haunted.

Well, at this point, I wouldn’t be surprised, but anyway . . .

There was no answer except continued sobs, so Tabitha knocked again. “I’m coming in,” she said, then paused. When no objections

came, she slowly pushed the door open.

Only one maid sat inside—the youngest, Alice, sitting on her bed with a locket in her hands. She was turning it over and over, sobbing so hard that Tabitha didn't know for sure that the younger woman had even noticed her.

“Alice?” she said. “May I come in?”

Alice looked up with red eyes, sniffing hard and wiping away her tears on her sleeve.

“Oh . . . Tabitha. Please do. I’m sorry, forgive me for being in such a state. I was just . . .”

“Don’t apologize,” Tabitha said gently. She walked over and sat next to Alice on the bed. “That’s a pretty necklace.”

“Thank you,” Alice replied. “My mother gave it to me before she died. There’s a picture of her inside, but I barely look at it, because whenever I do . . .”

“You end up in tears, I suppose,” Tabitha

replied sympathetically. “I understand. I had an aunt whom I adored with all of my heart until she died of an illness a few years ago, and I still cannot read the letters she wrote to me without sobbing.”

She took Alice’s free hand and squeezed it, and Alice gave her a grateful look in return. “She was my only family,” Alice said. “My whole life. I was barely a woman when she left me, and sometimes I wonder how disappointed she’d be if she could see me now.”

“I’m sure she wouldn’t,” Tabitha replied. Privately, she was horrified. The poor girl was only seventeen *now*; to be left alone at even younger must have been terrible. “I’m sure she’d be very proud.”

Tabitha wasn’t lying. To be one of the few maids in such a household was no reason for shame, and besides that, Alice was pleasant and polite. What more could a mother want from her daughter?

“I’m not so sure,” Alice replied. “But I appreciate you saying so. She was so strong, and I—well, I was not. I *am* not.”

“I disagree strongly,” Tabitha told her.

“Why, at your age, I was much more retiring.”

Had it really only been three years ago? It felt like so much longer since Tabitha had been so young. “Look at how stoically you handled this crisis! Why, Miss Joanna, who is *my* age, fell apart—but you were composed enough to fetch the constable with me. That doesn’t seem weak, in my opinion.”

“Crisis is a strong word,” Alice said with a low, dry breath that may have been meant to be a laugh. “Why, if you hear my fellow servants, the death of Mr. Barton was practically a reason for a party. I can’t imagine how *his* servants will feel when they finally receive the news that their master isn’t going to return.”

“Well, if he treated them badly, I’m sure they’ll be pleased also,” Tabitha told her. She noticed how Alice’s hand tightened around the

locket as their conversation continued. “Don’t you agree?”

“Perhaps,” Alice said. “Though I pity the older women especially. It can be very difficult to secure another position in this day and age, especially with nobody alive to give a reference. I worry what might happen to those who are not lucky enough to have friends or family around to help them.”

“Perhaps Mr. Grisham will hire them here?” Tabitha suggested.

“Perhaps,” Alice agreed. She sniffed, then said, “Listen, I know what everyone has to say about Mr. Grisham. I know they call him a weak man, a lackey and a cuckold, but there’s a kindness to him. He hired me when I had nothing. Less than nothing. My mother was the only thing in my life for so long . . .”

Alice’s expression dropped into one of pure misery again. The poor girl sighed, glancing down at her necklace once more.

Tabitha longed to show her empathy, but what did she know of loss? She had two parents who loved her, a sister who cared for her. Perhaps she'd have to settle for some basic human sympathy. "May . . . may I see her?" she asked.

Alice looked surprised at the request. She hesitated, then handed her the locket. Tabitha opened it and smiled sadly at the picture of a lovely young woman who could have been Alice's double.

“She’s beautiful,” Tabitha told Alice. “She truly is. I’m so very sorry for your loss.”

“You’ve always been kind, Tabitha,” Alice said. “I remember how you showed me kindness when this all started. I appreciated your friendship then more than you could know.”

Tabitha smiled at her. “Well—”

“My mother died almost three years ago. I was fifteen years old, and she died in my

arms,” Alice said. Her voice was no longer sad, but a kind of emotionless that was somehow even more depressing than the sorrow. “She had been sick for a long time, but that winter, it got her. I remember how her breath rattled as she said my name, over and over, telling me to live. I remember the very second she died.”

Tabitha fell quiet. She didn’t know how to react—but she did know that this was, clearly, a story that Alice needed to tell.

“She was always sick, my whole life. I

think it was the exhaustion that did it to her, you know,” Alice said, smiling without humor. “She was a maid once, with a steady job, solid pay. And then, one day, her master took a fancy to her. She tried to refuse, but . . .”

Alice’s expression became distant, and something niggled at the back of Tabitha’s mind. Something important, something she’d found out recently, but she couldn’t quite place it yet.

“She was turned out as soon as her belly

began to swell, without so much as a word to her sister or any of the other servants. Her master told them she had died, I believe,” Alice said in disgust. “Nowhere would hire her. She was an unmarried woman about to be a mother. The jobs she ended up working just to stay alive were . . .”

Tabitha shuddered. She could only imagine. Not for the first time, the young woman paused to consider how lucky she was to be born into a position of privilege. Her parents weren't nobility, perhaps, but if

anything, she appreciated being left out of the scandals of the upper echelons. Nevertheless, they were comfortable, and Tabitha would never have to worry about such things as Alice and her late mother had suffered.

“I remember when I was four; we were starving,” Alice whispered. “I was so sick that she feared I might die. She needed money for food, medicine . . . anything to keep me alive. That’s what made her finally get in touch with my father, after years of avoiding him. She wrote him letter after letter, but she never

received a reply, and all the while I was worsening. Eventually, she swallowed what little pride she had left and carried me all the way from the city to my father's country home, and she begged on the doorway for him to help me. She didn't mind if he turned her out in the cold and left her to die—only that I would live.”

The feeling in the back of Tabitha's mind was stronger now, more persistent. She knew, she was *certain* that she knew this story. Not only that, but it was one into which she'd

glimpsed recently. If only she could *remember* .

..

“I recovered by God’s grace and that alone,” Alice explained. “My father promised to help and loaded us both into a carriage. Mother thought that perhaps we were being taken to a hospital—but when it stopped, we were in the middle of nowhere, in some farmland far from the city and further from my father. They turned us out and left us there.”

The realization dawned, but Tabitha was too transfixed to ask. She needed to confirm it, but she couldn't speak before she heard the end of this story. Tabitha might already know that it had a sad ending but, much like those stories which one knows beforehand will end happily, it was the events contained within it that mattered more.

Especially with the realization I just had, knowing exactly what happened to Alice and her mother is vital.

Alice continued, “I survived until I was twelve by the grace of a farmer who found us. His wife nursed us back to health, and my mother—and later me—began to do work on his farm. It was difficult, impossible nearly, but we worked, and we ate, and we lived,” Alice said. “When I blossomed at twelve, the farmer turned us out in fear that I would distract his son. We made our way back into the city, and for the next three years my mother worked in every unsavory job you can imagine. She found me a job as a maid at an old lady’s home, and there I was taught to

Speak properly. She wouldn't allow me to work in any other way."

"And then your mother died," Tabitha whispered. "And you were employed by Grisham."

"I'd heard his name once or twice, and when I heard about the job, I knew I had to take it," Alice told her. "This area was my mother's home for so long that I wanted to be close to her. And then I met Barton."

“And you knew that he was your father,”

Tabitha breathed.

Alice nodded in confirmation. “He never knew who I was, and I never told him. Even though I look so much like my mother, I may as well have been a complete stranger. He was so smug. He flirted with the staff, even me—his own daughter, not that he knew that—and even his friends seemed to despise him. I met my mother’s sister, who still doesn’t know who I am, and learned of all the horrors that my mother went through in Barton’s

employment. And then one day I overheard a blazing argument between Mr. Grisham and Mr. Barton.”

“About Mrs. Grisham?” Tabitha guessed.

Alice shook her head. “No. Mr. Grisham made him swear to leave his maids alone. It was one of the only times I’ve seen him putting his foot down, but he was truly, endlessly furious, so much so that even Barton agreed to what he had to say.”

“What prompted such a thing?” Tabitha asked, though she suspected that she probably knew already.

“Mrs. Grisham does not tolerate staff who are in the family way,” Alice replied.

“Especially those sinners who become so when they are not yet wed. So it was no surprise that, at his wife’s urging, Mr. Grisham had to turn out one of my friends because the girl was showing signs of a swollen belly after Barton’s last visit.”

Tabitha grimaced. It was exactly what she had suspected. “What did he do?”

“Grisham asked Barton to care for her. I overheard the conversation. Barton simply laughed and said he didn’t know what Grisham was talking about. By the time Mr. Grisham tried to find alternate employment for the girl, it was too late—she was gone,” Alice said. “She was so ashamed, so terrified, that she left in the dead of night. I neither saw nor heard from her again. I have no idea what happened to her or to her child.”

Horrified, tears in her eyes, Tabitha whispered, “He was truly a terrible man. It’s no wonder that even those he considered closest are all now viable suspects in his murder.”

None of this would be featured in *Death in a Storm*, Tabitha knew. That was a light hearted murder mystery with elements of the gothic—it had no space for such terrible, inconceivable levels of tragedy.

“Yes,” Alice said with a small hum of contentment. “And at that moment, when I found out that the cycle continued with yet another woman, yet another child—that was when I knew that I had to kill him.”

Chapter 20

Ex Relatione

Some things are not so simple to write. In fact, some things should not be written at all. In all the adventures that Mr. Sharpe endured at that mansion, some of the most private words that he heard would never make it to the page. You must trust, dear reader, that this is for the best—and rest assured that there was nothing to hinder the true villain from receiving justice.

Excerpt from *Death in a Storm* (1818) by T.

Oakley, p. 443

Daniel and Laura sat together in the

women's room, more aware than they had ever been about how this whole nightmare was coming to an end at last. Unlike her sister and Reginald, Laura was not quite so certain that Mr. Grisham was the culprit. She had no evidence in particular to back this up—it was just a feeling in her gut.

“Is it wrong, do you think, that you and I have rekindled our love for one another under such terrible circumstances?” Laura asked.

“One man is dead and another will soon die for the crime. Is it not wrong to find joy in

such a situation?”

Daniel shrugged. “I needn’t repeat to you my opinion of Gregory Barton,” he said. “Nor how I feel about his death or his murderer. All I will say, Laura, is that there is no sin in our happiness. You know how the adage goes; they say it is *always* darkest before dawn.”

“That is true,” Laura replied, leaning her head against his shoulder. “And yet what a darkness it has been for us all. I wonder how Tabitha will fare after all of this.”

“I have the feeling that your sister will be more than all right,” Daniel said with a small smile. “Especially now that she and Reginald have gotten over their disagreement. The pair of them are quite the match, don’t you think?”

Laura did smile at that. “Look at us, treating a murder like a marriage broker!” she chuckled. “I am so glad we’re nearly at the end of all of this. I especially can’t wait to be rid of that horrible little inspector. Did you see how he spoke to me?”

Daniel nodded, a frown now on his face.

“I would have liked to challenge him to a duel, but I fear that may have ended rather poorly for us.”

Laura snorted. “Probably, my love,” she agreed. “Oh! How surprised my mother will be when she hears about all of this. No doubt my parents will suspect that Tabitha created the whole thing in her mind or stole the plot from one of those books.”

“Tabitha should take that as a compliment,” Daniel said.

“Oh?” Laura asked. “I imagine it would be quite upsetting to continuously not be taken seriously.”

Daniel laughed. “Well, dear, think of it. If Tabitha *did* make up this murder in her mind, the twists and turns would have been enough to fill a best-selling novel. Such a story would be a thrill to read and experience.”

“Hm, that is true,” Laura agreed. “I just hope . . .”

“What do you hope?” he asked.

“Well, I hope we are quite finished with the twists,” Laura admitted. “I like to think that things are at last beginning to wind down.”

Even as she said it, though, she couldn’t help but worry. Something—the same instinct that she’d thought about before—told her that

this story, with all of its twists and turns, was still far from over.

Reginald had hoped that Mrs. Grisham might be a little easier to question after their emotional breakthrough last time, but the opposite seemed to be the case. Without her husband beside her, she turned cold and distant in a way that Reginald suspected would have made Mrs. Paddington proud.

“I don’t understand why we have to go over this again, Inspector,” she said, folding her arms. It was not the whiny way in which Lady Wells had said it—rather, it was in a tone that brokered no argument. “I did not kill him. I did not want him dead. I didn’t have someone do it for me. Ergo, you are wasting both my time and your own.”

“Ma’am, if I believed everyone on their word alone, I would not be doing my job very well,” Claude told her politely. Reginald could barely fathom the difference in how he spoke

to this woman as opposed to how he'd spoken to all the others.

Perhaps she reminds him of his mother.

“Hmph. Well, I think this is all a terrible hassle. I have lost a dear, dear friend, and I have had all of these horrible people in my *home* for over a week. When will it end?”

“When we catch the murderer?” Reginald asked, failing to sound like he wasn't amused.

“Surely you want to know who killed your

‘dear, dear friend’.”

“I know who did it,” Mrs. Grisham sneered. “Janet Paddington. She’s a criminal.”

“Why do you say that?” Claude asked.

Reginald sighed and sat back in his chair. Mrs. Grisham was right about one thing—this *was* a waste of time. But, regardless, he was going to be stuck here for a while.

They finally left the room where Mrs. Grisham had been interviewed over an hour later. The woman had ranted at length about her perception of Mrs. Paddington, and then, without so much as a pause to breathe, claimed that Lady Wells was probably part of the crime as well.

“She certainly had a lot to say,” Claude commented. “How much credence do you think we should give to her suspicions?”

Reginald grimaced. “Not very much,” he replied. “She’s a terrible gossip, and the kind who likes to spread the worst kind of lies. I would not put too much stock in her accusations, especially since our primary suspect is still her husband.”

“Yes, her husband,” Claude mused. “Mr. Basil Grisham. He and the victim, the two of them were friends, were they not?”

“With complications, as you should know from Tabitha’s notes,” Reginald replied a little

pointedly. “There was an affair, and a number of other incidents. Grisham had more than enough motivation.”

“Hmm,” the inspector replied. “Well, regardless, before we go to see the man of the house, I shall need to relieve myself. Do you know where a man could go to do such a thing?”

Reginald snorted and gave him directions, ignoring Claude’s lack of decorum. When he was gone, it was a relief. Reginald

was more exhausted on this day than he had been in the last week and a half, and he appreciated having just a moment to sit down.

A few minutes passed, and then a very worried-looking figure wandered into his sight line. The two of them locked eyes, and Reginald saw a look of genuine fear there—and perhaps regret, too?”

“Miss Joanna?” he asked. “Are you quite well?”

“Oh! Mr. Hatcher—I mean, Reginald! I was just looking for you. I had hoped . . . well, I had hoped that you and I could speak for a moment, without your friend,” Joanna said nervously.

Reginald let out a breath. “Claude is an acquaintance, but certainly not a friend. Especially after his attitude today. Nonetheless, sit here with me if you like. I am listening.”

Joanna did sit, but she nervously sat with

her hands in her lap without any indication that she was about to start talking. In fact, the longer they sat, the less likely it seemed that she would be able to gather the nerves.

After a moment or two, Reginald decided she may need a little prompt. “How are you faring?”

“Oh, Reginald—quite terribly, I must admit,” she said, sounding very fretful. She had a handkerchief in her hands and was twisting and turning it into knots that

Reginald thought may never come undone.

“Everything has been quite overwhelming and terrifying for such a long time. I worry that it will never end!”

Reginald put a comforting hand on her arm. “Now, now. Claude may have a little bit of backward thought, but he is an excellent protector of the law. I assure you; we shall be able to leave this house very, very soon. The murderer will be apprehended any moment.”

“So, you know who did it, then?” Joanna

asked. She chewed on her lip, then said, "Erm, there's something which I have not yet told you. I wonder if we might be able to talk a little now? I'd like to tell you, in full, what I saw the night that Mr. Barton was killed."

Reginald stilled. "Please, do tell," he said quietly. "From the beginning."

"Well," Joanna said hesitantly. "It went *mostly* as I told you, but I wasn't very clear. You see, I really wasn't sure what I was supposed to think. One moment, Mr. Barton

was hale and hearty on his way to Mr.

Grisham's room, and the next he was dead! I

was confused—scared, even. I don't know—”

“Wait,” Reginald said, putting up a hand.

“Wait. Are you telling me that *Mr. Barton* was going to visit *Mr. Grisham* that night?”

Joanna nodded, her eyes wide. “Oh yes, most certainly. He even told that maid with him so. You see, she was carrying whiskey for him, already poured into two glasses. I thought that passing strange—I thought the

norm was to take a bottle . . .”

“It is,” Reginald replied with a frown.

“Do you have any more detail? What did he and the maid say to one another?”

“Well, I passed them only briefly, and didn’t hear much of the conversation,” Joanna admitted. “But I *did* hear him reminding her how imperative it was that Mr. Grisham drink from the cup with the blue bottom and that he, Mr. Barton, should have from the red.

“And then?” Reginald asked urgently. A new suspicion was forming in his mind, one that was even darker than anything that had happened in this case so far. “What happened next? Did he drink from his cup before he fell? Did the maid say anything in response?”

“I’m sorry,” Joanna replied. “I do not know. I walked past and next I heard a crash. Oh, it was *awful*. I simply can’t . . .”

The young woman began to weep, and Reginald offered her as much comfort as he

could manage while his mind was reeling.

Why in the world was Barton headed to Grisham's room at such an hour? Why was the whiskey pre-poured? Was that the source of the poison, and, if so, how did Barton end up dead?

All of that was still spinning around his mind when Joanna excused herself a few minutes later. Reginald was glad that Claude was taking so long—if he was honest, he much preferred to process the new information alone before he had to deal with the inspector

once again.

What had Joanna's information changed?

Well, it was one of two things—it either altered nothing about their perception of the case so far, or it altered *everything*. If Barton had been carrying the poison, then was this even a murder case at all?

I wish that Tabitha was here. She and I together would have been able to make sense of this.

He was just finishing this thought when a haughty cough came from the shadowy corner at the far end of the hallway.

Reginald shivered. “Yes, hello?” he called. “Can I help you?”

“Yes, I think perhaps you can, Mr. Hatcher,” Lady Wells’ voice said in a tone that was much more hesitant than her usual conceit. The woman walked around the corner, approaching him with an unusually serious expression on her face. “You see, I

have been thinking a lot since you came to my room with that horrible little man, and I have decided that you, at least, deserve to at last know the whole truth about this case.”

I’m not sure how many more revelations I can take.

“I’m listening, my lady,” he told her, placing extra emphasis on her title. It was best, he realized, to keep her happy if he wanted her to come through with the information that she promised. “Please, tell me

everything you know.”

“Well,” Lady Wells said. “It seems, Mr. Hatcher, that I have been reticent. I have, in fact, something very important to confess . . .”

Chapter 21

Contradictio In Adjecto

*How simple it would be to return to a time before
all of this, thought Miss Willoughby. Before the
complications and the deceit. Before the death and lies.
How easy it would be if things were back where she had
started, as a young woman who lived only through the
books she read, not troubled by the horrors of reality.*

How truly simple. And terrible.

Excerpt from *Death in a Storm* (1818) by T.

Oakley, p. 453

Tabitha knew she had to hurry before it

was too late. A man's life was at stake based on just a few words—and so, in fact, was Alice's.

Mr. Grisham was innocent of the death of Mr. Barton. That much was something that Tabitha knew for sure as she rushed through the corridors searching for Reginald and the inspector, hoping she wasn't too late. The problem, though, was what Alice had told her.

Alice, sweet, young Alice, had been the killer. That, too, was a fact. And yet, when

Tabitha thought of letting anyone know the truth, she found herself feeling physically ill. Imagining Alice, who had every reason in the world to want that man dead, dying in turn . . .

Oh, I can't think about it. I must find a way around all of this.

But first, she had to find Reginald. No matter what happened, she could not allow an innocent man to be arrested for the crime.

She was hurrying so quickly that she didn't even notice Reginald in front of her until she'd already run directly into him.

They both cried out, and then Reginald caught her by the arms and steadied her.

"Tabitha?" he asked incredulously. "What a bizarre coincidence—I was just looking for you. There's something we need to discuss."

"Reginald, it can wait," Tabitha said impatiently. "I have to tell you something urgently. Where is the inspector?"

“Claude is probably with Mr. Grisham by now,” Reginald replied, tilting his head. Despite the seriousness of the situation, Tabitha couldn’t help but take a moment to notice how adorable he looked doing that, like a curious puppy.

Not the time, Tabitha!

His words filtered into her mind and her stomach clenched. “Oh no,” she said. She grabbed his arms just above each elbow,

forcing him to pay full attention as she said,
“Reginald, Mr. Grisham is *not a murderer*. We
cannot allow this to happen!”

To her surprise, Reginald didn't look
shocked or confused. Instead, he looked . . .
curious. “There's something you need to know
before you make any declarations about who
is and who is not a killer,” Reginald told her
finally.

Tabitha sighed in exasperation, but her
curiosity burned too brightly to ignore

whatever he had to say. She glanced around then pulled him into a small side room, closing the door to ensure that they wouldn't be overheard. "All right," she said. "What are you talking about?"

"You should go first," Reginald replied. He frowned and said, "Tell me, please, how do you know who is and who is not a killer?"

Tabitha bit her lip. Yes, she knew who had killed Barton now, but she was hesitant just to blurt it out. She trusted Reginald,

perhaps was even falling in love with him, but her urge to protect a young woman who'd gone through so much was almost overwhelming.

“I . . .” she started. “I know who killed Barton. And you must believe me, the person who did so had good reason, and better intentions. I do not know what to do with this information, but we are not dealing with a cold-blooded murderer.”

Reginald frowned, looking extremely

confused. “What are you talking about?” he asked.

“What are *you* talking about?” Tabitha replied.

Reginald frowned and said, “Well, I just had a very interesting conversation with Lady Wells.”

What has she to do with this?

“You see, she had something to confess,”

Reginald went on. “As it turns out, she was reticent in sharing a particular piece of information. When she went to Mr. Barton for their tryst that evening, apparently the man decided to talk to her. Gloat for a while, even.”

“Gloat about what?” Tabitha asked, now utterly confused. She had thought that her revelation would have been the biggest shock of the day, and yet all of a sudden, she was more confused than ever.

Reginald looked at her very seriously.

“About his intentions and active plan to murder Mr. Grisham,” he replied.

What! That makes no sense!

“Are you sure of it?” she asked.

Reginald nodded. “It was the whole reason for the party. I suppose Lady Wells could have been lying, but she had no reason to do so, not now. He intended to poison the man and then place the blame on either Daniel

or myself, or perhaps both of us.”

“But *why*?” Tabitha was aghast. “Why would he do such a thing?”

“Well, he’d be rid of Grisham, who was his rival in love and family,” Reginald said. “And blaming me would give him full control of our firm, while blaming Daniel would finally win him an inheritance war that’s lasted for many generations. It’s the perfect crime—except it failed.”

“I don’t understand,” Tabitha said. It was true, though not for the reasons that Reginald might suspect. “How can that be the case?”

“I was confused, too, and I’m still not entirely sure of the link,” Reginald confessed. “But I was also approached by Joanna. As it turns out, she also saw more that night.”

Tabitha didn’t say anything, simply waiting for him to continue. Her breath caught as she waited, wondering how many more twists and turns this adventure would have

before it was finally over.

“Barton poisoned the whiskey, I’m sure of it,” Reginald told her. “And then, while toasting his anticipated crime, fate intervened. It seems that Barton drank his own poisoned whiskey in error and killed himself in the process.”

But he didn’t! How can both that and what Alice told me be the truth? Why would she confess if it was a lie?

To give herself time to think, Tabitha said, “I learned something, too.”

She launched into a truncated version of the story that Alice had told her, starting with Barton’s terrible mistreatment of the servant girls and ending with Alice seeking refuge at the home of the man closest to her horrible negligent father.

Reginald was staring at her in pure horror when she finished. “That poor girl. So, she stayed at the position here at Grisham’s

home in order to . . . what, spy on Barton? I suppose it makes sense; it allowed her to be close to him without being *too* close to him.”

“Yes, and no doubt to plot her revenge,” Tabitha added, her stomach squirming uncomfortably. “Not that one could blame her. If *my* mother had been treated in such a way . . .”

“You think that *she* killed him?” Reginald asked, his eyes wide. “I suppose poison is generally a woman’s weapon, but why would

Joanna and Lady Wells both say what they said? It makes no sense.”

“She *confessed* to the crime, Reginald,” Tabitha told him. “She admitted that she was the killer. She told me right to my face that she deliberately and knowingly caused his death. Why would anyone lie about such a thing?”

Troubled, Reginald shook his head. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “It seems that the girl trusted you deeply if she confessed such a

thing, and yet the facts . . . how can everything we've learned be true at the same time?"

Tabitha closed her eyes and imagined a piece of paper before her and a pen in her hand. She was not truly writing, but in her mind's eye when she set the pen to the page, the ink began to flow. It was always the best way to process her thoughts. She organized each fact they knew into a list, ready to process it all together.

1. *Miss Joanna saw Barton carrying the presumably poisoned whiskey to Mr. Grisham's room.*
2. *Mr. Barton confessed to Lady Wells that he intended to commit a murder that night.*
3. *Lady Wells wanted Barton dead, but she had a knife of her own and claimed that she would not have used poison to get the job done.*
4. *According to Mrs. Grisham, her son Scott was secretly fathered by Barton, and the two were having an ongoing affair.*
5. *Mr. Grisham was Barton's intended victim, but the poison never reached him.*
6. *Alice claims that she killed her own father.*

7. *Alice blames Barton for her mother's decline and death.*
8. *Reginald and Daniel were both marked to be accused of the murder of Mr. Grisham had it all gone accordingly.*
9. *Barton would never stoop to carrying a tray on his own and therefore had a servant do it for him.*
10. *This entire case is surrounded by opportunities and happenstance.*

It came to Tabitha then in a flash of inspiration. All of the points connected into one piece, creating a clear point in the

tapestry which marked the truth.

“Reginald,” she said urgently. “We need to get to the inspector. *Now.*”

“Everyone gather together, immediately,” Inspector Eldridge ordered, pointing imperiously to the parlor in a way that Laura found decidedly distasteful. She knew that it was uncharitable, but she could not help but think that the best part of this ending would

be getting as far away from this distasteful little man as possible.

Laura, there's a murderer among us. Be reasonable.

Daniel and Laura were the first to obey, however—best to listen to his commands than try to argue—and they seated themselves on the plush red settee and watched as everyone else entered.

First came the Paddingtons, all a group

once more. Miss Paddington had been weeping again. Her wide eyes were red and she kept daintily blowing her nose into a handkerchief. Laura found that she felt quite sorry for the girl. It must have been harrowing indeed to discover a body as she had.

Her mother looked decidedly more composed. True to form, Mrs. Paddington sat in a chair very primly, gazing around as though this whole event was beneath her. Her husband sat on a separate chair a little further away, looking so stressed that Laura wanted

nothing more than to call for a servant to fetch poor Mr. Paddington a hot toddy.

Lady Wells entered next, but the biggest surprise was how she carried herself. Gone was her usual air of haughtiness, and in its place was a mask of uncertainty which Laura barely recognized on the woman.

“What happened to *her*?” Daniel whispered in Laura’s ear. “She’s as pale as the moon and I daresay this is the longest I have ever seen that woman with her mouth closed.”

Laura tried her best not to giggle. It was far too serious a situation for that, she knew, but Daniel had a way of bringing her lighthearted side to the forefront even in the most challenging of circumstances.

“I suppose something changed,” Laura whispered back. “Perhaps she ran out of things to criticize and became seriously ill as a result.”

Daniel snorted, gaining a dirty look from

Mrs. Paddington, which in turn only made
Laura want to laugh more.

*What is wrong with us! This is a murder
investigation!*

And yet, how ridiculous these people
seemed after spending such a time in close
quarters with them! Lady Wells, with her
obsession with a courtesy title that meant next
to nothing, Mr. Paddington, a hapless man
who cringed before his wife, and Mrs.

Paddington, so determined to save face that

she forgot how to interact like a human being.

And then there were the Grishams—and here they were, entering now, Mrs. Grisham glaring at everything and everyone and Mr. Grisham with that simmering look of rage he so often wore just below the surface.

Yes, they were quite the ridiculous group. And Laura found it nearly impossible to be intimidated by any of them anymore.

Even if one is a cold-blooded killer.

The inspector closed the door behind the Grishams and turned to address the room.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I thank you for your attention,” he said. “I have gathered you all—”

“Not all,” Daniel interrupted. “Where’s Reg?”

“Tabby isn’t here either,” Laura noted.
“Shouldn’t we wait for them?”

Inspector Eldridge bristled, obviously

unhappy at the interruption to what was clearly a build-up to a reveal. “Well,” he said. “I am sure that Mr. Hatcher and Miss Oakley are off performing their own half-baked investigation. After detailed questioning, I have concluded that neither is a suspect, and so we do not need them and their endless queries here.”

Laura leaned over and mumbled to Daniel, “I don’t think he questioned either Reginald or Tabitha at all. Are we quite sure this man is qualified?”

Daniel snorted again, this time attracting more glares.

To his credit, Inspector Eldridge simply pretended not to be aware of the slight commotion. He continued to speak, perhaps a little more loudly than before. “I have the solemn duty of announcing to you all, my friends, that one of you is a murderer. You attended Mr. Barton’s party, with cold anger in your heart—and that was when you struck!”

“Who is it, then?” Mrs. Paddington snapped. “Get it over with. Some of us want to go home.”

The inspector’s eye twitched. “This person,” he said even more loudly, “coldly betrayed a friendship built from the ground up in order to best achieve their goals. This devil’s servant could no longer stand that another man had risen in station and value beyond where he ever could, and so he *slew* his challenger!”

“He?” Lady Wells piped up. “You’re saying a man did this?”

Everyone’s eyes darted back and forth between Daniel, Mr. Grisham, and Mr. Paddington.

“Precisely,” Inspector Eldridge replied triumphantly. “This man, who was cuckolded and betrayed. This man, who uncovered a scandal so massive it could tear his whole family apart. This man, who knew that he

must put a stop to all of this before his reputation was ruined forever.”

Laura saw Grisham’s face turn first red, and then a strange purple color as he realized what the inspector was implying.

“Now see here—” Grisham started.

“This man,” Inspector Eldridge practically shouted. “This murderous felon, shall be brought before a judge to confess to his crimes. Then, he will be hung from the

neck in the public square until he is dead, as an example to all others like him. I pray only that God can forgive him!”

“Basil, what—” Mrs. Grisham started, looking horrified.

“No!” Mr. Grisham snarled. “No, this isn’t —”

“This man!” Eldridge bellowed. “Is named—”

A loud crash interrupted him and they all turned to see the door fly open as Tabitha and Reginald hurtled inside.

“Stop!”

Chapter 22

Curia Advisari Vult

The gathered party gasped as Mr. Sharpe and Miss Willoughby entered the room, crying out for the arrest to halt before the wrong man was tried and killed. Miss Willoughby's head was in a whirl, and she could barely believe it had come to this—but here they were. Now, at last, the real challenge began.

Excerpt from *Death in a Storm* (1818) by T.

Oakley, p. 501

“Stop!” Reginald cried, and Tabitha called the same beside him.

“Stop!” Tabitha shouted again. “Grisham is innocent!”

“Innocent?” Inspector Eldridge spat. “Sit down, girl. You know not of what you speak.”

“I know plenty, thank you,” Tabitha replied.

Reginald walked with her into the center of the room, making sure that they could be clearly seen by everyone. He watched as

Tabitha caught Laura's eye and gave her sister a grim smile.

As well she should. There's hardly any other way to prepare for these final revelations.

“Reginald and I have some things to share that may be of vital interest to this case, Inspector Eldridge,” Tabitha said.

Claude huffed but—to Reginald's surprise and relief—he sat on one of the empty chairs.

“Get it over and done with, then,” he said,

folding his arms.

“Reginald? Would you like to start?”

Tabitha asked, putting a hand on his arm.

Reginald nodded and took a breath. This needed to be delivered in precisely the correct manner. “Humor me, my friends, and allow us to explore in detail the events of that fateful night one last time,” he said.

Everyone murmured, some unhappily.

Mrs. Paddington rolled her eyes and Mrs.

Grisham looked beside herself with outrage about the whole situation—but nobody objected. Reginald took this as a good sign and decided he must forge ahead.

“Let us go back to the reason for this *soiree* in the first place,” Reginald said. “Does anyone know why Mr. Barton decided to commandeer Mr. Grisham’s home for over a week for this event?”

“For the same reason that an aggressive male gorilla in a zoo drums on its chest,” Mrs.

Paddington said disdainfully. “To assert and maintain dominance.” Her eyes flickered over, briefly, to Mrs. Grisham. “And mating rights.”

“Do you have something to say, Janet?”

Mrs. Grisham demanded shrilly.

“Not at all, Leona,” Mrs. Paddington answered primly. “Not at all.”

Tabitha glanced at Reginald, and he gave her what he hoped was a reassuring smile in return.

“Allow us to continue,” he said. “The party began for no ostensible reason, with an odd array of guests. Mr. and Mrs. Grisham were family friends, yes, but there is no denying that Mr. Barton and Mr. Roberts were rivals at best.”

Daniel nodded. “I myself thought it odd when I received the invitation,” he admitted.

“There was me, his business partner, which makes some semblance of sense,”

Reginald continued. “And then, strangely, the Paddingtons. Mrs. Paddington has never been subtle about her distaste for the man, but perhaps it was for her husband? Tell me, Mr. Paddington, how was your relationship with the victim?”

“Er . . . that is to say, I . . .” Mr. Paddington said awkwardly. “Well, I’d known Barton for years, but . . .”

“But you were in debt to him,” Tabitha interrupted. “Severe debt. You were not

friends, nor were you even in business together, and yet he invited you and your family here. Why? Another excuse for dominance, perhaps?”

“That or he wanted to meet my Joanna,” Mrs. Paddington spat.

“And then there was Lady Wells,” Reginald went on. “My lady, you and the victim . . .”

“He killed my husband, as surely as if he

held the gun himself,” Lady Wells said, plainly and emotionlessly. “You know this. Why must we go over it again and again?”

“Why indeed,” Reginald said. “Lady Wells, tell us . . . you were with Mr. Barton the night he was killed, were you not?”

The pronouncement was followed by several gasps. Lady Wells remained entirely composed as she nodded and said, “I was, yes. A few hours before his death, I was in his room with him.”

“Alma!” Mrs. Grisham exclaimed in a strangled voice. “*You?* And Gregory. What—”

“The exact nature of Lady Wells and Mr. Barton’s relationship isn’t relevant to our point, I don’t think,” Tabitha said mildly. “What is relevant is what Mr. Barton told her ladyship while she was there.”

“But we get ahead of ourselves,” Reginald said. “Let us, for the last time, discuss the motives of each and every person

in this room, shall we?”

Tabitha nodded. “Of all the guests, I had the least motive; I never met Barton before and, apart from Daniel, I didn’t know any of you other than my sister before arriving here.”

Reginald nodded. “I, of course, was his direct business partner. I will not lie; that is a status I wished to change. I had hoped to talk him into retiring.”

“My sister loves her husband, so her

motive would have been tied to his,” Tabitha went on. “And Daniel’s motive would be simple; the death of Barton means that he will likely be able to reclaim family land that has been contested for generations.”

“Then we come to Mr. Grisham,” Reginald said. He caught the sharp look the man gave him, but Grisham needn’t have worried—Reginald wasn’t going to reveal the secret of Scott’s fatherhood. That was nobody’s business but that of the father, mother, and son themselves. “Everyone here knows

speculation and rumors about Barton's treatment of Grisham. Some is true, and some is false. It is not for me to reveal which is which, but he certainly had more than sufficient motive."

"As did Mrs. Grisham," Tabitha added.

"We know that she wished to hide the exact relationship she held with Mr. Barton, and we know that she was involved in more than a few of those rumors in question."

"How dare—" Mrs. Grisham started, but

stopped when her husband shot her a look.

“Next, Mr. Paddington. The man was in insurmountable debt, enough to send him into poverty and ruin his wife and daughter if he did not act as Mr. Barton’s puppet,” Reginald said.

“Which of course gives motivation to Miss Joanna and, indeed, Mrs. Paddington,” Tabitha continued. “Mrs. Paddington especially was well known to despise Mr. Barton, after all—it would be more than

enough motive to save herself and her family.”

“And at last, we return to Lady Wells,”

Reginald concluded. “Whose complex relationship with Mr. Barton would fill several books if someone was to write it out from beginning to end. She held him responsible for the death of her husband, who was in debt even worse than Mr. Paddington’s, and she had a plot for revenge. Lady Wells, won’t you tell me again what you admitted just a few hours ago?”

“Ah, it comes to this,” Lady Wells said.

“You wish for me to announce it to the room at large, I suppose, Mr. Hatcher?”

“If you will, my lady,” Reginald said courteously. “I know that you, much like the rest of us, long only for justice.”

Lady Wells shrugged. “Justice was served the moment he died. It hardly matters who did it. Nonetheless, allow me to clarify what Miss Oakley and Mr. Hatcher are hinting at. That night, as I was arranging myself to leave his

rooms, Mr. Barton admitted to me the reason for this gathering.”

“Tell us then, woman, and get it over with,” Mrs. Paddington urged.

“Mr. Barton intended to rid himself of Grisham once and for all, you see,” Lady Wells replied simply. She didn’t even react to the torrent of horrified gasps that echoed around the room then. “He informed me that he would take a drink with Grisham in the early hours of the morning, and that there he would

kill him.”

“*What?*” Mr. Grisham demanded, outraged. “This is a falsehood. After everything I gave for him, everything he *did* to me, that was how I was to be repaid?”

“He planned to come to your room with whiskey,” Tabitha said quietly. “He poisoned it by himself, and marked the glasses so that he would know exactly which glass was which. He intended to poison you, then place the blame on Daniel and Reginald. With

Grisham out of the way, he could have this house, access to Mrs. Grisham, and all of the shares from their ventures together.”

“That also explains why there were two tickets to board the *Liberty* in his room. They were never meant for him, since he thought he covered all his tracks to have the blame shifted from him. Possibly the tickets were a ruse meant to make Daniel and I seem guilty by trying to flee after Mr. Grisham’s death, which would implicate us even further. And with Daniel and I out of the way, he’d end a

feud that lasted generations while simultaneously gaining control of our business,” Reginald added. “It would all have worked perfectly well for him.”

“But it never came to pass,” Tabitha said.

“Indeed,” Reginald replied. “Because he died before he could. And after all of this investigation and fear, we have concluded that the murderer was . . . none of you.”

“*What?*” several voices echoed around

him.

The conversation Reginald had with Tabitha just before coming to the room flashed before his eyes.

“Alice never intended to go through with murder, but that night Mr. Barton enlisted her to help him commit one of his own,” Tabitha had explained as they rushed through the halls. “He filled the cups and marked the one with the blue bottom as poisoned so that he would know which to drink.”

“And Alice saw her opportunity,” Reginald had realized. “She could rid the world of Barton and save a man’s life all at once. So, when Barton decided to take a drink . . .”

“She handed him the wrong cup on purpose,” Tabitha had agreed, out of breath. “And then she let him die, killed by his own murder weapon.”

That was the conclusion they had come to, and it was, Reginald felt in his gut, the

truth. It would be simple enough to explain the whole story from the beginning to the gathered room and declare the real culprit here and now.

And yet . . .

Tabitha stared at him, reaching out and gripping his hand so tightly that it was almost painful. She didn't speak, but he could tell by her expression the words she was repeating in her silent pleas, regardless.

She wants me to hide Alice's involvement.

*She wants me to allow Barton's killer to walk
free.*

It was as though time stood still for a few moments while Reginald considered his options. Alice had her reasons, yes. Many would find what she had done sympathetic—and, indeed, she had saved Mr. Grisham's life in the process.

Tabitha had explained the whole story to him. He wanted to scream in defiance of the

outrageous practices that allowed a woman to be used, abused, and tossed aside like Alice's mother had been. Reginald couldn't imagine the agony that poor young Alice had felt, watching her mother go through protracted suffering before eventually dying in her daughter's arms.

What would Reginald have done if that was the case in his life? He didn't know. He'd been born to a life of wealth and privilege, and he could barely conceive of suffering through such things.

Would he have acted as Alice did? Would he have done worse? Better? It bothered him that he didn't know; it frustrated him that he could not clearly navigate the morality of this case.

Eventually, what he had to do became obvious. He was a man of integrity, a man of honor. A man of justice.

“Reginald . . .” Tabitha whispered.

“Tabitha,” he said. “I need to do what is right. No matter what the cost.”

He took a deep breath.

Then he spoke.

Chapter 23

Felo de Se

Such shock echoed around the room when Mr. Sharpe announced the verdict, that he was not sure that the world would ever be the same. He could not blame them. It was, after all, the most shocking turn of events, and one of the most horrific crimes.

Excerpt from *Death in a Storm* (1818) by T.

Oakley, p. 510.

Tabitha's mind was whirling with fear and anticipation. She didn't want to imagine Alice swinging from a gibbet, her life draining

away through a broken neck. Yes, she had been instrumental in killing a man—but, to Tabitha, none of it seemed like justice.

She also stopped a murder. Doesn't that count for anything?

Tabitha braced herself as Reginald spoke, summarizing the case before the inspector and sealing fate. She could not blame him for doing what was right—but she knew that she would never look at him in the same way again, either.

How fast shall I have to run to reach Alice's room and warn her so that she can escape?

“Yes,” Reginald said. “I must do what is right. Justice must be served—but it seems that Mr. Barton himself already took care of that part for us most efficiently. I propose to you that he was, after all, both victim and perpetrator of this tragic crime.”

“What are you saying, boy?” Mrs. Paddington demanded. “Are you implying that

Barton killed *himself*?”

Tabitha stared at Reginald, her heart swelling with hope. She could barely believe what she was hearing, but she had also rarely been so thankful for a person’s words.

“And why not?” Reginald replied, raising his voice a little to be heard over the sudden outbreak of chatter at his pronouncement. “It need not have been a deliberate crime.

Perhaps rather than suicide, one may call it self-manslaughter—but either way, all of the

clues and logic lead to one thing; Barton's death was the fault of nobody but himself. Isn't that right, Tabitha?"

Tabitha gave him a glowing look, then nodded seriously. "Absolutely," she replied solemnly. "His attempt to murder Grisham ended up with his own death. It is tragic, devastating—but perhaps, ultimately, the best of outcomes. After all, had he been successful in his original intent, no doubt Inspector Eldridge here would have caught him—and then two men would be dead as he hung for

his crime.”

Reginald nodded, nothing on his face giving away the gambit. Tabitha felt a swell of affection for him and found that she was dreadfully sorry she had ever doubted him.

“So, to recapitulate the facts and order of events,” Reginald said. Everyone quieted down, and every eye was on him now. “Mr. Barton had a meeting with Lady Wells that evening, during which he confessed that he intended to murder Mr. Grisham. That night,

Mr. Barton prepared whiskey and poisoned one cup, then made his way across the manor to the small suite where Mr. and Mrs. Grisham slept.”

“He . . . did tell me we should have a late-night drink,” Grisham said hoarsely, touching his neck as though he could feel the pulse slowing there. “I was waiting in my little sitting room while Leona slept just through the door.”

Reginald nodded. “You see,” he said.

“However, on the way to the crime, Mr.

Barton was overcome with thirst. Very foolishly—perhaps because of the darkness, or perhaps simply hubris—he drank from the wrong cup. He staggered, dropped the tray on the table, and then collapsed upon the stairs to be found early the next morning.”

Inspector Eldridge hummed in thought.

“So, the would-be murderer murdered his own self instead,” he mused. “I see. I see. It makes sense, and it certainly matches what I know of Barton’s character.”

“I call it justice,” Lady Wells declared.

“He died as my husband did. I cannot pretend to shed tears over such an event.”

“He . . . was going to hurt Basil? But why?” Mrs. Grisham asked. Tabitha actually found herself feeling sorry for the woman, who sounded more lost and confused than one would have ever guessed possible for her. “He was going to kill him?”

“That’s what Alma said, you daft

woman,” Mrs. Paddington said sharply. “Don’t
your ears work?”

“Janet, please,” Mr. Paddington
muttered. “The poor woman is in shock.”

“I don’t care, particularly,” Mrs.
Paddington replied waspishly. “What I do care
about is what that means for us. Legally,
Barton is a murderer and a felon. Our debts to
him are now void, yes? Hatcher?”

“Er . . . yes, that is the truth, though I

will have to go through the legal papers and acquisitions before we know exactly what will happen to Mr. Barton's estate," Reginald replied.

"And the land will default to my family at last," Daniel breathed. "Barton, that sorry excuse for a man, finally did something right."

"Hold on, now," Inspector Eldridge demanded. "Is there anyone—anyone at all—who can corroborate the theory posited by my colleague here?"

Tabitha gave the inspector a look of equal amusement and exasperation.

Ah, so now that Reginald did his job for him, he's a 'colleague', is he?

“I can,” Miss Joanna said quietly.

Everyone fell silent, their eyes turning collectively toward the young woman who sat with her hands in her lap.

“Joanna?” her mother asked. “What are you saying?”

Tabitha froze. Joanna had seen Barton on his way to Grisham’s room that night, indeed—and she’d seen that he had a maid at his side. If Joanna mentioned that, it could throw the whole case wide open once more.

“Mr. Hatcher already explained that I saw Mr. Barton that night,” Joanna said placidly, her calm voice giving no indication of what she was going to say next. “He was

carrying the tray with the glasses and mumbling to himself that he must not mistake one for the other. I will admit, he sounded quite confused, but I did not pay much attention. It makes sense to me that he may have lifted the wrong one a little later.”

Tabitha gaped at Joanna. Why had the girl lied? She’d have to ask her later—but right this second, it didn’t matter.

“Well, the girl hardly has the wit to lie. I’d take that as solid enough evidence,” Lady

Wells said. “Barton killed himself. The end.”

“Do not insult my daughter, you old witch,” Mrs. Paddington said, but even her usual spite had been tempered. “But . . . it’s over?”

Reginald glanced at Inspector Eldridge. “What say you, Claude?” he asked.

The inspector nodded. “I see no reason to prolong this,” he said. “I shall have my constables wrap up the investigation and

return to the courts to inform them of a suicide. I suggest that you all stay here one more night to allow the flooding to fade completely and allow yourselves to recuperate.”

“But after that, we’re free to go?” Laura asked.

“You’re all free to go,” the inspector confirmed. “Come, Hatcher. Walk me to the door, won’t you?”

Reginald nodded, and with a wink at Tabitha, he left with the inspector. The sigh of relief from everyone in the room was so palpable that Tabitha felt as though all of the air had gone through the door with the men. If she jumped in this atmosphere, she thought she may float.

“Well, am I glad this business is over,” Lady Wells said, standing up and once again looking her usual haughty self. She dusted off her skirts and said, “I shall be in my room—Mr. Barton’s room—if anyone needs me.”

“And we shall be borrowing the services of young Mr. Roberts here,” Mrs. Paddington said. “You are also a lawyer, are you not?”

“Er, yes,” Daniel replied. “You wish to discuss debt and repayment?”

“Not in front of these people,” Mrs. Paddington snapped. Daniel glanced at Laura, who nodded, then together he and the Paddington parents walked out of the room.

Mr. Grisham stood and cleared his throat.

“Leona and I shall go and pack. We will be taking a few weeks at the home of my son, Scott, before returning here.”

“We will?” Mrs. Grisham asked shakily.

“We will,” Mr. Grisham replied firmly.

“And when we return, many, many things are going to change.”

The two of them left together, and Tabitha couldn't help but smile. Mr. Grisham

was not necessarily the best of men. He wasn't amongst the greats by any means. But right now, Tabitha truly believed that he had time to grow and flourish. She hoped that Mrs. Grisham would also find closure and repair her relationship with her husband and son.

After the Grishams had left, only Tabitha, Laura, and Joanna remained within the room. Tabitha carefully walked over and closed the door so that they wouldn't be heard before she approached Joanna.

“We need to talk,” she said.

“About what?” Joanna asked innocently.

Tabitha frowned at her. “You lied. I don’t understand why you lied.”

Laura made her way over to join them, tilting her head curiously. “She lied?” she asked. “About what? Mr. Barton *didn’t* drink his own poisoned whiskey?”

“Oh, he did,” Tabitha said. “Almost

everything that Reginald said was true. Except . . . he was not the one who was responsible for how he drank from that cup.”

Laura leaned closer. “Who—?”

“Alice,” Tabitha admitted. “The maid.”

She could not—and would not—lie to Laura, and so instead she spent some time explaining the whole story for the second time that day. When she was finished, she saw that both Laura and Joanna had tears in their eyes.

“That’s so sad,” Laura whispered. “That poor girl. No wonder she . . . but also . . . oh, how horrible!”

“Truly,” Joanna replied. “I had no idea. Oh, poor Alice! I hope that she can be at peace now. Mr. Barton really was atrocious, wasn’t he?”

“He was,” Tabitha agreed. “But I don’t understand; if you didn’t know anything about what really happened, then why on earth

didn't you admit that you saw a maid by Mr. Barton's side?"

“Well,” Joanna replied, shrugging. “You and Reginald are my friends. Forgive me for saying so, but it was remarkably obvious that you were hiding *something*—to me, at least, though nobody else seemed to notice. When Reginald failed to mention the maid, I supposed that there must be a reason, so I helped him. And now I find that there was.”

Laura and Tabitha both stared at her,

both sisters at a complete loss for words.

Joanna tilted her head, a frown forming on her face. “Oh dear,” she said. “Did I do something wrong? Is this perhaps one of those times where I have entirely misread my role? Should I apologize—”

“No!” Tabitha said quickly. “No, don’t apologize. You saved a woman’s life today, Joanna. Thank you, thank you, from the bottom of my heart.”

Joanna smiled. She really was very pretty when she relaxed a little. “Well . . . thank you, too,” Joanna said. “My mother is very protective of me, and I’ve never had real friends before. It seems to me that it’s important to look after the few that I have.”

The two women embraced, and then Laura joined in. The three of them hugged for a while before they pulled apart.

A few moments later, the door opened and Reginald walked back in. “Well,” he said,

looking exhausted as he sank into a chair.

“That was all rather exciting, wasn’t it?”

Tabitha ran over to him and threw her arms around him, and he hugged her back just as tightly.

She only dimly noticed as Laura said to Joanna, “Would you like me to take you back up to your room?”

“Oh, yes please,” Joanna replied. “And don’t worry, nobody else will know.”

Tabitha waited until her sister and Joanna were gone, leaving her and Reginald alone. They didn't break the embrace for a long time.

When they eventually did, Reginald said, "Joanna?"

"She lied for *us*, Reginald," Tabitha said softly. "I do not think people give her nearly enough credit. She is really quite intelligent, in her own way."

“I agree,” Reginald said. “Now, there are two matters of business we must urgently take care of. The second thing we need to do is go to Alice and inform her of the outcome. We’ll also need to plan what happens to her from here on out, as she cannot stay in Grisham’s employ, especially since Grisham will no doubt take on a number of Mr. Barton’s own servants.”

“Yes,” Tabitha agreed. “Oh, she is going to be so *relieved*. I’m so happy that this sad

story could come to an end at last. Thank you so much for not turning her in.”

“I told you—I wanted to do what was right. There would have been no justice in sending that young woman to the gallows for Barton’s death,” Reginald replied.

Tabitha smiled, and he smiled back at her. How handsome he was! How marvelous! It still baffled her that someone so bright and wonderful could have come into her life through something so terrible.

“Oh,” she said, suddenly remembering his words properly. “What business must we take care of first?”

“Hm?” he asked.

“You said that we shall go to Alice in a second. What must come before that?” Tabitha pressed.

“Oh,” Reginald replied. He stood up from the seat and wrapped his arms around her

waist. “Well, this.”

When they kissed this time, it was not the new and exciting experience it had been the first time. When Tabitha wrapped her arms around his neck and held him close, when they released their pent-up feelings of joy and frustration in that kiss, it was not the beginning of an adventure.

Instead, to Tabitha, it felt as if she was at last coming home.

Chapter 24

Cessante Ratione Legis, Cessat Ipsa Lex

And thus, so comes to an end the harrowing tale of how a wicked man's last act in this world was to remove himself from it. For Mr. Sharpe and Miss Willoughby, everything was different. There was no denying that none of the members of the household would ever return to their version of normal again—and, Mr. Sharpe had to note, that may not be a bad thing.

Excerpt from *Death in a Storm* (1818) by T.

Oakley, p. 534

Reginald and Tabitha walked through the

corridors toward the servants' quarters, holding hands as though this was their first courtship outing rather than the end of a murder investigation.

I suppose that if Tabitha agrees to continue along the path with me, we will never simply be a normal couple such as our parents have always expected of us.

Reginald had to admit that he found the thought rather appealing. Normalcy had always seemed a tad dull to him, anyway.

“Just down these stairs,” Tabitha told him. “She should be waiting for us in the room. Do be gentle with her, Reginald; she’s still very upset.”

“It will be all right, for everyone involved, I promise,” Reginald said, and he meant it.

Tabitha smiled at him with that smile he had grown so fond of in his time here at Grisham’s home. How had he only known her

for such a short time? When he looked at this woman now, he felt as if she'd been in his life forever.

They headed down the stairs together and pushed the door open. The girl, Alice, sat inside, her face paler than milk, nervously turning a locket over and over in her hands. She jumped when the door opened, then seemed to breathe a little when she saw Tabitha.

“Mr. Hatcher, sir,” Alice greeted

nervously, getting to her feet. “How is the inspector finding the case?”

“It’s all right,” Tabitha said gently. She walked past Reginald to stand before Alice, and then took the girl’s hands in her own. “It’s all right,” she said again, soothing like a mother. “Reginald knows everything.”

Alice’s eyes widened and she whipped her head to stare at Reginald. He did his best to wear a kind expression, wanting to assuage her fear. “Miss Alice,” he said. “I am so sorry

for everything that you have gone through.

Rest assured that your ordeal is now over at last.”

“What—what does he mean?” Alice asked Tabitha, still obviously frightened. “Am I to be hanged, then?”

“Hanged? For what?” Tabitha asked with exaggerated surprise.

Reginald shrugged. “I can’t say I know what you mean. After all, the fine inspector

has come to the official conclusion that Mr. Barton is a victim of accidental suicide as a direct result of his attempted murder of Mr. Grisham. As far as anyone is concerned, the case is closed. For good.”

Alice stared, open-mouthed. “Are . . . are you saying I’m free?”

“You’re free, Alice,” Tabitha told her. “Barton is dead. Your name is clear. It’s over—all of it. Your mother can rest now, and so can you.”

Alice's lip began to tremble, and Reginald dug in his pocket as he walked toward the women. As soon as he reached them, she burst into deep sobs, the kind that overwhelmed her so much that Reginald and Tabitha had to help her sit back down on the bed.

“How . . . how can I *ever* thank you for this?” Alice cried, burying her face in Reginald's handkerchief. “How can I even begin to repay what you've done for me?”

“By living,” Reginald told her. “Justly, and well. And, preferably, without any more . . . accidents.”

“I . . . I . . .” Alice stammered, though she gave a weak laugh at Reginald’s dry joke. “But . . . but what do I do now?”

“Well, first, you shall come to live with my sister and I until we find out what can happen next,” Tabitha said decisively. “You cannot simply return to service with Mr. Grisham—and something tells me that you

don't particularly want to, in any case."

Alice nodded. "You'd take me in?

Knowing what I've done?"

Tabitha shrugged. "You're a young woman who needs help and a friend. By all accounts, you saved a man's life—someone would have died that night regardless. You're not a murderer, Alice, killer or not—and I am going to help protect you. I promise."

"As will I," Reginald said, affection

swelling in his chest for the impossibly bright young woman comforting this girl. “I have a number of contacts abroad—in Europe, and even in the Americas. If you like, I can see about securing you a position in a house in Albany within the month.”

“I . . . I always wanted to visit America,” Alice said in wonder. “You would do that for me? I hardly feel like I deserve it.”

“You deserve it and more,” Tabitha told her. “And if you can’t believe that, then

believe that we are doing this for your mother. Think how happy she would be to know that her daughter made it without having to scrape by.”

Tearful still, Alice nodded. “Someday, somehow, I will find some way to repay you. I *will*.”

She’s so young. Full of so much promise. I made the right decision in letting her walk free.

“Then,” he said. “I shall draft the letters

the moment I get home. There's no cause for alarm; I will make sure that I write only in code. I shall make out that I am enquiring for the cousin of a friend, which can also be used to explain your presence at Daniel's home if for some reason you need it."

"And don't worry," Tabitha added. "I will stay at my sister's as long as you are there. I will be with you every step of the way until you set sail, I promise."

"You two," Alice said, "are so good. I am

blessed by God to have met you. Thank you.

Thank you."

"I don't know about that," Reginald said.

He glanced at Tabitha, and felt a warmth come over him. Perhaps, God or fate or whatever existed out there *had* intervened to create this moment—for how else could he have come to know this woman in such an unlikely way? "I think, whatever the reason we all came here, the important thing was that we learned that there are many shades of gray between right and wrong."

“Indeed,” Tabitha said. “And that sometimes—well, sometimes, reality is much, much stranger than fiction.”

The following morning, as Barton’s guests filtered out of the house, Reginald and Tabitha watched them from the garden. While Tabitha scribbled in her notebook, Reginald could not help but study the expressions of the others. All of them blinked in surprise as they stepped

into the sun, as if they were seeing it for the first time.

Maybe, for some of them, it feels that they are.

Daniel and Laura had left before the sun rose, smuggling Alice away in the dark of night. Reginald and Tabitha had chosen to stay—so central had they been to this case that it would have seemed more than odd if they'd simply vanished.

So now they watched, and they waited, until at last the end came for real.

The Paddingtons left first. Mr. Paddington was standing taller, and Mrs. Paddington's expression was softer than anything that Reginald had ever seen on her face before.

"She'll always be an insufferable woman," Reginald commented quietly. "But perhaps there will be a *little* improvement now that her husband's debts are cleared."

“Perhaps,” Tabitha agreed, then grinned, looking up from her book. “Or perhaps she’ll simply find something else to deride him about, instead.”

Joanna followed a little behind them, and when she saw Reginald and Tabitha, she told her parents to wait. She hurried over to them, and Tabitha handed Reginald her notebook so that she could stand up and meet her.

“Oh, Tabitha, Reginald, you did it!”

Joanna said, hugging Tabitha tightly.

“We couldn’t have without your help,”

Tabitha said sincerely. “I hope you always remember that.”

Joanna pulled back from the hug and nodded. “I will,” she said. She chewed on her lip for a moment, then said, “So . . . now that this is all over, will we still be friends? All three of us?”

Tabitha glanced at Reginald, and he smiled. “Of course we will,” Reginald said. “All of us.”

“Even though . . .” Joanna started, but then hesitated. “Even though I am not very smart and will never be a proper society woman?”

Reginald pointed toward Joanna’s parents who were, as he had predicted, already bickering again. “Well, if that’s the measure of intelligence and society mores, I

think you're better off, don't you?"

Tabitha smiled. "You're a good person and a great friend. And you're perfect the way you are."

Joanna gave them both a shy smile, then hugged Tabitha once more. She hesitated for half a second then gave Reginald a quick hug too. It surprised him, but did not displease him, and after a moment he returned it.

When she was done, she hurried after her

parents, a blush showing on her ears and neck.

Tabitha sat back down and began to scribble again.

“What are you writing?” he asked her.

“Oh—well, I cannot tell the truth in the novel version of the story, you see,” Tabitha said. “However small the risk, I do not want someone connecting any points that would incriminate Alice, or, indeed, the two of us. So, I am altering the story a little to make it

clear that Mr. Blake—that is, Mr. Barton—
really *was* at fault.”

She thinks of everything.

Reginald nodded, but before he could comment, the doors opened and the next guest came out. If Mrs. Paddington looked slightly humbled by the experience, Lady Wells seemed, if anything, considerably smugger than ever before. She was carrying a small bag alongside her trunk, no doubt stuffed with possessions of Barton’s that he’d kept at

Grisham's home.

“It seems she raided the bedroom,”

Reginald observed. “She must have felt quite the satisfaction doing so.”

“I agree,” Tabitha said. “No doubt it felt like some sort of retribution for the years she has suffered without her husband. I hope it gave her some satisfaction.”

“I hope so too,” Reginald replied.

Lady Wells did not approach them, but she did meet their eyes as she turned and glanced their way. She raised a hand in a curious little half wave, and the two of them did the same.

She's proud and stubborn, but for all her faults, now she feels she finally has justice. I cannot begrudge her that.

After the wave, Lady Wells nodded. Reginald nodded back, and then the lady turned and climbed into her carriage.

Finally, Mr. and Mrs. Grisham exited their own home, leaving it behind for their extended visit to their son. Reginald privately wondered if they'd ever return, or if the stench of death and illicit affairs would haunt this place too much for the Grishams to ever consider their life here again.

Mr. Grisham approached Reginald, while Mrs. Grisham hung back a little. "Mr. Hatcher," he said, holding out a hand. "Miss Oakley. Thank you. You saved me from the

noose.”

“Mr. Grisham,” Reginald replied. He took the hand and shook it. “We would never have allowed an innocent man to hang.”

“I am not sure innocent applies,” Mr. Grisham admitted. “I was aware of Barton’s faults. We all were. But I allowed myself to be blinded to the worst of his deeds over and over again, until he turned on me too. Perhaps it was inevitable that he should do so.”

“We’re . . . sorry about your son, Mr. Grisham,” Tabitha said quietly. “I can’t imagine how you must feel.”

“Nonsense,” Grisham replied. “Scott Grisham is my son, and Leona—the weak, silly, easily manipulated woman that she is—is my wife. I will not allow Barton to have hold over my family anymore.”

Reginald nodded. He could respect that.

“Well, good luck to you, Grisham.”

“Actually, before I go, I have something for you,” Mr. Grisham said. He held out a folded envelope, sealed tight with wax.

Reginald took it. “What is this?” he asked.

“A gentleman repays his debts,” Grisham said. “I believe that the contents of that envelope will be very interesting to you. You intend to go into business with the Roberts boy, do you not?”

“I do,” Reginald replied.

Grisham nodded. “Barton kept it in my house for years. He said it was the only way to keep it safe.”

Though he was tempted, Reginald knew that now was not the time to explore the contents of the envelope. He tucked it safely away in his inner breast pocket.

“Well, the best of luck to you,” Mr. Grisham said. He tipped his hat to Tabitha,

and then Reginald saw something he'd never seen on Grisham's face before—a real smile.

“And if you two do make something of yourselves, do invite me and my wife to the wedding. We have a whole life to rebuild.”

Tabitha blushed a deep red immediately, but Reginald just found himself laughing.

“Well,” Reginald said. “The best of luck to you too, Grisham.”

Grisham nodded once more, then he and

his wife left.

At last, it was just Reginald and Tabitha alone. Without either speaking a word, they both began to stroll around the gardens of this house that had been their prison, hand in hand.

“It’s a strangely beautiful old building,” Tabitha mused. “I’ve never seen any like it, have you?”

“Not one that was still in use, in any

case,” Reginald agreed. “Though it certainly looks the part to be the setting of one of your dark novels. You *did* check that nobody was creating some terrifying monster in the basement, didn’t you?”

Tabitha laughed. “Oh, please,” she said with a grin. “Didn’t you read the book at all? Dr. Frankenstein’s creation may have acted viciously, even badly at times, but it was a product of the man who made it. It was a horror because it was created to become one, and Dr. Frankenstein died from his own

hubris.”

Reginald nodded thoughtfully. “Perhaps there were more similarities between the victim in our tale and the protagonist of Mrs. Shelley’s than one would initially expect,” he said.

Tabitha smiled faintly at him. “It’s the eternal question that has tormented mankind since time immemorial, and one to which we will never have the answer. In any given story, who is the real monster?”

Daniel and Laura's carriage arrived a little later and, just as Reginald was helping Tabitha inside, he realized that he could not let his chance slip away.

"I wondered," he said. "If you would mind terribly if I accompanied you to your sister's house? I would like to check on Alice, and of course Daniel is always pleased to see me . . ."

Tabitha smiled broadly, and he knew she wasn't fooled. "Of course," she said demurely. "My carriage is your carriage. Join me."

The pair of them climbed inside, and the carriage began to move away. Neither spoke as they trundled away from the manor, watching out of the window as Mr. Grisham's home and the horror story they had faced there faded into the distance.

Once they were out on country roads

once more, Reginald turned to face Tabitha again. They cleared the valley, and as the sunlight hit the carriage, Reginald's heart sped a little in his chest. It highlighted her hair, bringing out an iridescence not unlike the green-blues of the feathers of a crow or a raven.

She really is one of the most unbelievably lovely women that I have ever met. I would be quite mad to let this pass.

“Tabitha?” he said. “May I ask you

something?”

She laughed. What a pleasant sound it was! “Why, Reginald, I would have thought we were beyond such formalities. Yes, ask me anything you like—unless you intend to accuse me of murder.”

He chuckled. “Will you ever end your teasing, you incorrigible woman?” he asked.

“Why should I do such a thing, when I know full well that it is one of the things that

you like best about me?” Tabitha retorted.

Reginald smiled then said, “It is. I cannot argue with that.”

“What have you to ask me?” Tabitha said.

“Well,” Reginald replied. “I think I have made it quite clear, but I find myself intensely drawn to you, Tabitha Oakley. I think you are one of the most beautiful, intelligent, and witty women in the world, and I count myself

lucky every moment I get to spend with you.”

Tabitha’s face blushed a brilliant red.

“Oh my,” she said. “Is there a but?”

He shook his head. “Not at all,” he replied. “Only that I would like to engage you, if you approve, in a formal courtship.”

Tabitha stared at him for a moment, then—to his concern—started to laugh. “Oh, Reginald, why would you phrase it that way?” she giggled. “Are we strangers at a ball, to be

so formal with one another?”

Reginald wondered if *he* was the one blushing now. “Well, I . . . you cannot imagine that such a request is easy.”

“And why not?” Tabitha asked. “You are attracted to me. I think it is quite clear that I am attracted to you. I would be a fool if I did anything *but*, ah, ‘engage in a formal courtship’ with you.”

It was as though Reginald’s very soul had

brightened. “Really?” he asked.

She smiled. “Really. I can think of nothing that would make me happier.”

Reginald felt a thousand emotions at once, but this time there was no conflict—only harmony. Delight, victory, affection, anticipation . . . all of these bubbled up inside him like a fountain of golden sparks, escaping into the air as a carefree laugh of joy.

“You have no idea how happy you have

made me,” he said. “I know I have only known you a couple of weeks, and that we have a lot to learn about each other, but I believe that we already have the basis of a solid future.”

“As do I,” she replied, her own eyes alive with excitement. “Now, my dear suitor—are you going to kiss me, or aren’t you?”

He did. And a whole new story began.

Chapter 25

De Lege Ferenda

Caroline knew that her older sister, Catherine, thought that she was dead. Perhaps it was for the best.

She had lost her employment, lost her fiancé, and lost her trust in men. Now, with an illegitimate child growing inside her and no positive signs of progress, Caroline knew she needed to start life anew—and although she would miss her sister, this was better for them both.

Excerpt from *A Daughter of Eve* by T. Oakley

(1820), p. 1.

Two weeks had passed since they were at

last released from their sentence in Grisham's manor. Barton's funeral had come and gone, so poorly attended that it had been at the top of society gossip since the event. Suddenly, accusations of extortion and other personal and professional misconduct were coming out from all sides.

Meanwhile, Tabitha and Reginald had stayed on with Daniel and Laura, taking some time to relax at last. For Tabitha, this was finally the moment that she could have the visit she'd always intended.

Reginald wrote to an old university friend, who responded promptly that he would do what he could to help Alice.

The sky was bluer than Tabitha ever remembered it, punctuated with only a few white fluffy clouds and the cawing of gulls as they swooped around the harbor. Around them was the smell of salt and sea, and Tabitha closed her eyes to breathe it in, praying as she did so for a safe voyage for her young friend.

Initially, she had thought that sailing away in the middle of the day when the sun was at its highest point was a mistake.

Reginald, though, had assured her that Alice would be safest while hiding in plain sight—in this case, dressed as a young male dockhand helping the ship's captain load his cargo.

Nobody would notice when one young man did not exit the ship before it set sail.

“It's beautiful here,” Alice said. She stood between them now, Tabitha on one side of her

and Reginald on the other, waiting for the moment when she would be called ahead to board. “I think I shall miss England.”

“England shall miss you, too,” Tabitha replied. “But this is for the best. Think of all the excitement that will await you in America! You shall have a whole new world to explore, away from the dark memories.”

Alice nodded. “I know. And yet I am still scared.”

Reginald put a hand on the girl's shoulder. "Captain Marsh is an old friend of mine. He's made the crossing a hundred times, and I have no doubt he'll make it a hundred more. We couldn't be leaving you in safer hands."

The young woman smiled weakly at him. "You have both been better friends than I could ever have hoped for. Certainly better than I ever deserved."

"You are not a bad person, Alice,"

Tabitha told her. “You are a sweet young woman who faced horrible circumstances, and I am truly grateful that we were able to give you a second chance. All that I ask of you is that you do not squander it.”

“That’s right,” Reginald replied. “Go to America. Find a job, or a husband and children if you prefer, or even both. Live your life the way your mother would have wanted, free of vengeance and hatred.”

“I will,” Alice said, wiping her eyes “I

swear to you that I will.”

She smiled tearfully then hugged them both, one after the other, but then she hesitated.

“Would it be . . . would it be awful of me to ask you each one more favor?” she asked.

Tabitha and Reginald exchanged looks. Reginald gave a little shrug, and Tabitha nodded. “Of course, ask whatever you need,” she said gently. “If it is within our power,

we'll do what we can for you.”

Alice smiled at them a little nervously, then reached into her bag and pulled out a small package and, on top of that, a letter. She handed the latter to Reginald first.

“What is this?” he asked.

Alice hesitated then said, “It’s for a servant of Mr. Grisham. She’s his head housekeeper, her name is Catherine Wordsworth. She was always kind to me.”

Reginald nodded. “I’ll get it to her. We spoke to Catherine, you know. Is Wordsworth her married name?”

Alice nodded. “It is. Her maiden name was Hendricks, just like mine—and my mother’s. In all the time I worked for Mr. Grisham, I never told her more than my first name. I just didn’t know how to do it.”

“Her sister, the one she thought dead—your mother?” Reginald asked, the last piece

of the puzzle sliding into place at last.

The girl smiled sadly. “Yes. Her name was Caroline. I want my aunt to know who I am, and know that I appreciate her kindness even though I could never bring myself to tell her the truth. Will you pass the letter on to her, Mr. Hatcher?”

“I will,” Reginald promised.

Tabitha watched this exchange, her heart constricting at the onrush of emotion. Perhaps

they might be able to, in time, find some way to reunite this aunt and niece? Her mind was already whirling with a million ideas on how to do so when Alice turned to her.

“Tabitha, I have a favor to ask of you, as well,” Alice said. She took one of Tabitha’s hands in hers and said, “It’s important. Extremely. In fact, I’ve never asked anyone something so important.”

“Ask it,” Tabitha asked.

Alice offered her the package. “Inside is what I could save of my mother’s diaries. The rest are my own recollections. I would like you to write my mother’s story, once I am gone and living far away under another name. I want the world to know what a hero she was and what she endured. I want the world to remember her, too. Is . . . is that something you can do for me?”

Tabitha hesitated. To write such a thing would certainly please many while upsetting many others. One did not simply accuse

members of the gentry, especially the deceased, of atrocities. It was well-known that such things were common between rich men and servant girls; it wasn't proper, but nobody needed to *talk* about it.

If anyone discovers that I am secretly writing about Barton, then my career could be ruined. My reputation could be ruined.

But what did that matter? What really seemed important was what kind of author Tabitha wanted to be—and, as she had learned

in the last couple of weeks, it was not one who shied away from a challenge.

“When I have completed *Death in a Storm*, I shall send you a copy,” Tabitha told her. “And afterwards, I will begin to read through these diaries, and I *will* write a version of your mother’s story. I promise.”

Alice broke out into a sunny smile that really highlighted to Tabitha how young the girl was. “Thank you. Again,” she said.

“Though,” Tabitha added. “There is a condition.”

“Name it,” Alice said without hesitating at all.

Tabitha smiled. “I may need to correspond with you to make sure I have all of the facts right. Would you be open to a continuing channel of communication between us?”

In answer, Alice just laughed and hugged

her tight again.

Just then, a whistle sounded so loudly that it startled some of the gulls. Amongst their caws of protest, a rough man's voice called, "Come, boy! If you're boarding, now's your chance!"

"I . . . I had better go," Alice said. She tried to smile again, but Tabitha could see how pale she had gone.

"Don't worry," Reginald told her. "Be

free.”

Alice nodded. One more quick hug later for each of them, she turned and hurried toward the boat. Without a word, Tabitha moved closer to Reginald. He put an arm around her shoulders, she an arm around his waist, and they stood and watched as the ship prepared to leave.

The penetrating whistle blew again, and several dockhands shouted over one another as they prepared the boat for its launch. At

last, it slowly began to move away from the harbor. They couldn't see Alice—Captain Marsh had insisted she stay below deck until they were far enough from port—but Tabitha waved anyway.

Reginald and Tabitha stood there like that, just the two of them, until at last the boat vanished out of sight over the horizon. When all that was left was the glimmering water, they let out a simultaneous sigh.

“Did we do the right thing?” Tabitha

asked.

Reginald seemed to think about it for a moment. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “Some would see Alice as a hero—a girl who saved a man’s life and got justice for her mother.”

“Indeed. But some will see her as a villain. An opportunistic youth bent on vengeance who murdered her better in cold blood,” Tabitha said, though the words felt like acid on her tongue. “So, who’s right?”

“Perhaps both,” Reginald said. “Perhaps neither. Maybe we’ll never really have an answer over whether what we did is right or wrong or otherwise. All I know is that no matter what, someone would have died that night—and all we really did was stop it from becoming two deaths in a row.”

Tabitha nodded. They stood there a few moments longer, and then she sighed. “Time to go, I think,” she said. “It looks like Alice has left us both with one more piece of work to do.”

“Yes indeed,” Reginald said. “Besides, if we’re late for our midday meal, Laura may see to it that there’s *another* murder.”

Tabitha gasped and slapped his arm, though she was laughing. “Reginald! That’s terrible!” she exclaimed.

He simply grinned. Then, hand in hand, they headed home.

Once the ship was in the open sea,
Barton's killer was invited above deck. As they
stared into the water, they—no, *she*—felt that
mantle sloughing from her shoulders at last.
There would be no more pretending. No more
hiding.

She was not simply a killer. She was a
young woman on her way to start a new life.
As Alice told herself that over and over,
breathing in the sea air, she began to at last
feel hope.

Right or wrong, Alice would never regret what she had done. She would never lie awake at night and question the morality of her actions, never cry herself to sleep. Her heart felt lighter, as though she'd finally released a weight that had chained her down since her mother's death—and, God willing, it would never return.

The young captain approached and offered her a cup, which she took and sipped gratefully. It had been a few hours since they

left port, and her throat felt awfully dry.

“It’ll take us a good few weeks yet before we make port,” he told her. “It’s usually just over a month. Are you up for such a journey?”

“If I wasn’t,” Alice said with a slight smile, “it would be too late to do much about it now.”

Captain Marsh chuckled. “Aye, that’s true,” he agreed. He hesitated then said, “Miss Alice, you should know—Reginald told me the

whole story. I know your situation, and now that we're at sea, you don't need to hide yourself here."

Surprised, Alice blinked at him. "I . . . oh, well. Thank you," she said. "That's very, very kind."

They stood in silence for a moment, just watching the waves.

"This is a merchant ship, isn't it?" Alice asked. "Do you often cross between

countries?”

“My younger sister lives with her new husband in Virginia,” Captain Marsh explained. “So, I figured taking advantage of the travel time to make a bit of profit could hardly be a bad thing. Maybe one day I’ll settle on one land or another, but for now, there’s a lot to be said about the freedom of the sea.”

“Hmm,” Alice said. She closed her eyes, listening to the peace around her. “Yes,” she

agreed. “It’s quite freeing.”

When she opened her eyes again, Captain Marsh was smiling at her. “So,” he said. “What does a young woman like you intend to do in the Americas, all alone, without an idea of where to go or what to do next?”

I will build a life. I will make a home. I will take everything from the world that was denied to my mother, and I will act with the kindness of the ones who brought me here.

Alice took a breath. “I’m going to live,
Captain,” she said. “I’m going to live.”

Chapter 26

Naturalia Negotii

Despite everything that had happened and that was still to happen, Caroline did not agree that she was cursed. What the gentleman had done to her, how he had forced her onto the streets and left her to rot—it had been awful. Leaving Catherine behind had been terrible. But how could she think her life so terrible when she held this newly-born child in her arms?

Excerpt from *A Daughter of Eve* (1820) by T.

Oakley, p. 53.

“And if you sign here, Mr. Hatcher, then

the transfer will be complete,” the lawyer said, offering him the form.

Reginald could scarcely believe it. He’d received a letter a few days ago announcing that Mr. Barton’s will had been read—or would have been, had the man had one.

How a man whose entire career was based in financial law could fail to write a will is beyond me.

As a felon, Barton’s property would be

reclaimed by the state, but that still left the substantial manner of his hoarded fortune. It was more than Reginald could have ever imagined and, since Barton had died without any legal heirs or kin, it now belonged to Reginald himself.

His hand shook as he signed on the line. A new era of his life was about to begin—and despite how much it would help, money had very little to do with it.

The first thing that Reginald did when he got back to his office was draft a document to ensure that around two thirds of Barton's financial remnants were rerouted to Alice. It was *her* money, after all—well, hers and however many half-brothers and sisters she had in the world that she would never meet. Reginald could not in good conscience keep it from her.

A third, however, he kept behind for the sake of the business. There was more than

enough in Barton's collection to pay off the areas where the business had been struggling and, after just a few weeks, they were turning a true profit for the first time in years.

It was for that reason that Reginald was now sitting in Daniel's study, waiting for his friend to join him. Tabitha was still here, downstairs with her sister, and Reginald couldn't help but think how nice it would be to spend the day with her—but he had something urgent to act upon first.

Daniel entered the study, closing the door behind him. “Good to see you, Reg,” he said. “I wasn’t aware you still came here for any other reason than to visit my sister-in-law. I figured that once she heads back to London, I’d never see you again.”

Reginald laughed. He supposed that he deserved that; he *had* been directing his focus fairly heavily on Tabitha since they had entered their official courtship.

“Well, I came here specifically to see you

today,” Reginald told him. “I was hoping you’d look over some documentation with me.

Daniel cocked an eyebrow. “Always on the job. All right. Let’s see what we have.”

Reginald drew out his large satchel and began withdrawing the numerous files from it. “These are the men and women Barton had in some sort of financial turmoil. I would like to parse their files and see what debts I can easily forgive. Those that I can’t, I hope to consolidate into simpler, smaller repayments. I

won't have anyone suffering while I am at the reins.”

Daniel nodded thoughtfully, taking the first file and opening it. After a few minutes of rifling through the paperwork, he let out a low whistle. “My God. This poor fellow, Anderson, he paid off the original sum three times over already, but Barton has piled on so much interest that he’s deeper in debt than he was before.”

Reginald grimaced. “He must have been

desperate to come to Barton in the first place. I wish he'd spoken to me instead. Start a pile over there . . .”

One by one, they went through each file, slowly adding them to one of three piles.

The smallest pile contained those who had more recent borrowings, who could reasonably be expected to repay in full with a lower rate of interest. The second were men like Anderson who had been unfairly bullied into their position. Their debts could be easily

written off and forgiven without particularly damaging the business in any way.

The third pile was by far the largest, and was definitely going to require the most work. These were the people whose debts were too insurmountable to completely forgive, but for whom Reginald thought he could still find some solution.

“I’m going to need to interview every one of these,” Reginald said, gazing at the formidable pile. “And try to come up with

some individual solution for each. I was wondering if you might help me with that part, too.”

“As a favor?” Daniel asked, raising an eyebrow. “I don’t know, Reg. It’s a lot of work, and you know I’d do anything to help you, but —”

“Not as a favor, Danny,” Reginald interrupted. “As my partner.”

Daniel sat still for a moment.

“Think about it,” Reginald went on.

“Hatcher and Roberts, right there on the sign, just like we always talked about. And if we do decide to diversify from financial law, it’s a step we can take together. What do you say?”

“Are you serious?” Daniel asked. “Really? You want to give me half your business?”

“Of course not,” Reginald replied. “I want to give you *Barton’s* half of my business. And then I expect you to help it grow into

something wonderful.”

Daniel broke out into a sunny smile. “I knew I liked you for a reason,” he said.

“Just one reason?” Reginald asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Oh, yes, of course. Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” Daniel replied.

Both friends laughed, and then Reginald held out a hand. With another grin, Daniel

accepted it. They shook on it, and the deal was done.

. . . and, though Mr. Blake's legacy would last for many years, he would be horrified to find that his memory would not. Who would mourn for such a man? The lady, whose husband he drove to suicide? His friend, who he attempted to murder, or his lover, who almost lost everything?

No. Blake's time was over. From now, Mr. Sharpe would run the firm, and he would turn his interest to

criminal law. One day, perhaps, there'd be no need for such, but as Mr. Blake's actions had proven, Mr. Sharpe would have to be on alert for a long time.

But he knew that he wouldn't be alone. As he turned to the doorway, there she stood. Miss Willoughby, smiling, ready to work. She had given him hope when there was none, shown him life when he had thought it was over. And now . . . now, they would face the world together.

Because together, they could face any storm.

With that final sentence, Tabitha leaned

back and exhaled, realizing that it was done. She had done it—she had finished her novel, ready to be published, and the thought made her so giddy that she almost didn't know what to do.

“Laura!” she cried. “Laura, come quickly!”

A few moments later, her sister hurried into the room, looking alarmed. “What’s wrong?” Laura asked.

“It’s done!” she squealed, feeling half a child again.

Laura’s eyes widened, and then she began to cheer. Both sisters laughed and danced, hugging one another tight.

“What happens now?” Laura asked finally, when the first part of their celebration was done.

“Now,” Tabitha said, excitement filling her mind and buzzing in her brain. “Now, I

have a letter to send.”

The offices of *The Englishwoman's Review* were on the opposite end of the city from the home where Tabitha and Laura had grown up. The sisters, Reginald, and Daniel all traveled to London in silent agreement not yet to go to Mr. and Mrs. Oakley.

If I return home, this will all be over. And I'm not ready for that, not yet.

Tabitha knew that was irrational. She knew that Reginald would still want to see her when she lived back in her father's home—but she would miss Laura and Daniel, especially since Laura had let it slip that they were trying for a baby.

She shook her head, clearing that out of her mind. All of this could wait. Today was about one thing—meeting with Cecilia, and getting one more step closer to releasing her book out into the world.

She knocked on the office door and a young woman ushered them all inside, sending them to the back office immediately. Inside sat a young woman with fiery red hair, speaking in rapid French with a blonde woman. In her arms was a baby, perhaps ten months old.

“Cecilia?” Tabitha said hesitantly. “I am sorry—are we interrupting?”

“Not at all, not at all,” the redhead

replied. She passed the baby to the blonde woman. “Val, take Linus for a walk, won’t you? I promised Tabitha a meeting.”

“Ah, you are the woman writer, *non*?”

Val asked in a heavily accented voice. “It is a pleasure to meet you. I read some of your manuscript; I hope you do not mind. It was *magnifique*, a truly intriguing read.”

“Oh,” Tabitha said, surprised. “Well, thank you.”

Val smiled then left with the baby. At Cecilia's gesture, Tabitha took a seat, and her three companions did as well.

"You remember my sister, Laura," Tabitha introduced. "This is her husband, Mr. Daniel Roberts, and my . . . friend, Mr. Reginald Hatcher. Gentlemen, please meet Lady Walford."

"Please do *not*," Cecilia laughed. "Just Cecilia is fine, thank you. Mrs. Rumley if you absolutely must. I am only a countess when

my husband really needs it, and Tabitha here is teasing me most awfully.”

Reginald laughed. “She does that rather a lot, I’ve found.”

Tabitha shrugged, unrepentant.

“Well, now, I heard about that shocking case in the country a few weeks back,” Cecilia said. “And wouldn’t you know it, many of the details match the plot of your book.”

“Do they? I hadn’t noticed,” Tabitha said innocently.

“Hm,” Cecilia replied. She glanced at Reginald. “Is this the so-called ‘Mr. Sharpe’, then? The handsome investigator who found your—er, *Miss Willoughby’s*—heart?”

“I suppose that I deserved to be embarrassed in return,” Tabitha said, blushing a little, while Reginald grinned.

Cecilia smiled good-naturedly. “Well, I

had a talk with the office. We mostly focus on *The Review* and similar projects, you know that, but everyone agreed that we might be wise to expand into book publication.”

Tabitha’s breath sped. “Really?” she asked. “You’re going to publish it?”

“We cannot pay you a significant advance,” Cecilia warned. “And I cannot promise any commercial success. After all, we’re hardly Longman or Edgerton. However, I’ll see to it that it’s printed and distributed on

the market, and I'll personally write up an advertisement to entice our readers to buy a copy."

"And your price?" Daniel asked shrewdly.

"Meaning no offense, of course, but . . ."

Cecilia shrugged. "No offense taken. This is a place of business, after all. It isn't considered standard to pay more than a lump sum but—if you so wish—we would be willing to give you a portion of the sales of each novel. How much that would be depends on

the book's success, of course, but the eventual goal will be to halve the profits completely."

"Of course," Tabitha said. "And I trust you, Cecilia. I know you'll try your best to help it succeed."

"I shall do my best to get it circulated into the world," Cecilia replied. "But you, Tabitha, will be the one who makes this book a success."

By the time they returned to Daniel's home that night, it was well after dark, but Tabitha had never felt lighter. Hours had passed since she and Cecilia agreed on the final deal for the initial publication of *Death in a Storm*, but Tabitha's body still felt as sunny as it had when she first walked into the office.

The four of them had a drink and a small celebratory late-evening meal when they got home, but Laura and Daniel soon confessed that they were tired and headed off to bed.

That left Tabitha and Reginald alone together in the drawing room, each sipping their warmed fruit wine. They sat together on the same sofa, not speaking much, just enjoying one another's company.

“Next week,” Tabitha said, “I think it is time that I headed back home to my parents. I have, it seems, a lot to tell them.”

“You do,” Reginald agreed. “I will be sad to see you go—but, then, I should perhaps

spend more time trying to fix my business.

Maybe a very small break will be a good thing.”

“Maybe it will,” Tabitha agreed.

They were quiet for a few moments.

Tabitha contemplated the idea of not seeing him every day, and found she wasn’t very fond of it. Before she could think any further down that path, however, Reginald spoke again.

“Tabitha, this may seem a little forward

from a man who's known you little over a month," Reginald said. "But I want you to know that I'm proud of you. You have accomplished so much in a world where that seems impossible. I'm honored to know you."

Tabitha stared at him for a moment. "I . . . I don't know what to say," she admitted in a faltering voice.

"Well, would you look at that," Reginald teased. "The author, lost for words! Surely this must be a sign of the end of times indeed."

Tabitha laughed and leaned her head on his shoulder. His arm went around her, so naturally that it felt as if she was born to be here, in his embrace.

“Reginald?” she said. “Is it too morbid to say that I’m glad that things happened as they did at Mr. Grisham’s home? I know a man lost his life, but . . . well . . .”

“A little morbid,” Reginald chuckled.

“Why do you say so?”

“Well, because of it, I finally achieved two of the things I’ve wished for my whole life,” Tabitha said. “I shall be a published author before we know it, and my words will be read by hundreds, perhaps even thousands, if the *Review*’s readers each pick up a copy.”

Reginald smiled, squeezing her shoulder.

“And the second thing?”

“Well, I didn’t know that I was wishing for you until I found you,” she told him

honestly. “But I don’t think that anyone else could ever have made me so happy.”

Reginald leaned down and kissed her forehead. “It’s funny that you should say so,” he replied softly. “Because I was just thinking the very same thing about you.”

Chapter 27

Data Certa

*“Mama,” asked young Alice one day. “How will
we survive?”*

*Caroline didn’t want to cry, but it was hard. Alice was
so sick, and the gentleman had turned them away from
his door.*

*Well, so be it, then. It didn’t matter, not when they had
each other.*

*“We’ll survive the same way we always have, my
darling,” Caroline told her daughter. “Together.”*

Excerpt from A Daughter of Eve (1820) by T.

Oakley, p. 102.

It was only two months since the day Tabitha arrived at her sister's home, but it felt like a lifetime between then and now. Though Daniel stayed behind to help Reginald with work, Laura accompanied Tabitha on her carriage ride back into London and back to her parents' home.

“Don't look so maudlin,” Laura told her as they made their leisurely way through the countryside. “I shall stay with you for a few weeks, since it has been a while since I saw

Mother and Father. Daniel may join us later, and Reginald already told you that he will try to visit every weekend.”

“I know, I know,” Tabitha said with a sigh. “And he said he will write every single day, too. I know all of this, and yet I feel dissatisfied. I think I shall miss the excitement of life in the country as compared to the drab sameness of the city.”

“You’re an odd duck, Tabitha Oakley,” Laura said with a laugh. “Heavens, you must

be the only person to have uttered such a sentence in that order. Most people *long* for the excitement of the city!”

“Mm,” Tabitha muttered. She knew her sister was right, but . . . how to explain?

“Except that you are no longer there. Most of my friends live on the other side of London. And . . .”

“And you’ve grown used to seeing Reginald every day, perhaps?” Laura asked innocently.

Tabitha felt a familiar blush on her cheeks, but she could hardly deny it. “I . . . well, you see . . .” she stammered.

Laura laughed, but not unkindly. “Oh, darling. There’s no reason to get embarrassed. After all, you’re the one who helped remind me what love is. Without you, I’m not sure that Daniel and I would have been able to get over our awkwardness and realize how much we love each other once again.”

“Me?” Tabitha asked, astonished. “But I didn’t do anything!”

“It isn’t what you did,” Laura replied, shaking her head. “But you brought us together. You were a reason for us to bond again, to force us to remember why we got married in the first place. It may not make sense to you now, Tabby, but I thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

Tabitha still felt a little incredulous, but she smiled and shrugged. “Well, if you insist,

my dear sister,” she said. “I suppose you would know more than I do!”

They both giggled, and then Laura said, “Oh, I simply can’t anymore. I planned to wait until we had been at our parents’ home for a few weeks so that I could make sure and then include Mother, but I simply have to tell you now.”

Tabitha tilted her head. “Tell me what?” she asked.

“I think,” Laura said, leaning in close,
“that you may soon be an aunt.”

Tabitha gasped. “What! You’re sure?”

“Almost certain,” Laura confirmed. “I
really need to wait a little longer to be
absolutely sure, but . . . oh, I do not know how
to explain it. I have had some of the usual
symptoms, you know, the ones we don’t
discuss in polite company, but it is more than
that. I just have a . . . a feeling.”

Tabitha nodded. She didn't know much about the mysteries of pregnancy beyond what she had read in books, but she *did* know the importance of following one's hunches to their conclusions. If Laura thought this was true, then Tabitha believed her.

“Oh, congratulations,” Tabitha exclaimed, excited from the bottom of her heart. “A thousand congratulations! Have you told Daniel?”

Laura shook her head. “Not yet. I shall,

but I . . . well, I wanted you to be the first to know.”

Tabitha leaned over and hugged her sister tight. “You will be a wonderful mother. I simply cannot wait to meet your child.”

Both of them had tears in their eyes, and they both started to laugh and cry at the same time as they noticed it. A death had occurred, and it had changed everything. But, as it occurred to Tabitha now, life was a cycle. Yes, there was death and blood and pain—but

there was also birth, and newness, and joy.

They had moved from the dark stage toward the light, and as Tabitha hugged her sister now and imagined what life would be like with her little niece or nephew, she knew she would enjoy every moment of it.

“Laura! Tabitha!” their mother exclaimed as they entered the house. The older woman ran to them, wrapping them both in a tight

hug. “My girls, my girls. Laura, I did not expect you. Has something happened with your husband?”

“I know, Mother,” Laura said. “And no, Daniel and I are perfectly happy. I simply wanted to visit for a while with Tabitha. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Mind!” Mrs. Oakley asked. “Not at all, not at all. Come, both of you, and have some tea.”

Tabitha and Laura exchanged secret amused looks as they followed their mother through to the kitchen. Tabitha had once found this irritating, but now she found it vaguely endearing.

If the world was on fire, Mother would offer tea.

Their father sat at the table, and he, too, looked pleased to see them. Once the whole family was seated together and the initial pleasantries were exchanged, Mr. Oakley said,

“So, my girls. How was Tabitha’s trip to the countryside?”

Mr. and Mrs. Oakley smiled the same way at this, and Tabitha realized—they somehow had not heard about the murder! They, rather smugly, were expecting a response about the boredom of country life.

“Oh, you know . . .” Laura started diplomatically.

“Well,” Tabitha interrupted. “Laura and

Daniel took me to a party. There, the host was killed by poison, we were trapped by the storm for almost two weeks, and I think I may have met the man I will love for the rest of my life while solving the mystery of who killed said host.”

Her parents looked at one another again, and then they both burst into laughter, her mother’s high and long, her father’s a low, amused rumble.

“Oh, Tabby,” her father chortled. “What

an imagination you have, girl.”

“That’s the kind of story you could put into one of your books that you’re always twittering away about!” Mrs. Oakley added. “A gentleman murdered at his own party!”

Tabitha snorted, and Laura said, “Erm . . . actually, she’s telling the truth. Mr. Barton died by accidental suicide the very moment we arrived at the party, and Tabitha and Daniel’s friend Reginald worked together to stop poor Mr. Grisham from being sent

straight to prison.”

“Suicide!” their mother gasped, covering her mouth. “Is this true?!”

“You can’t mean Barton, the solicitor, can you?” her father asked, raising his eyebrows.

“Gregory Barton? Half of my colleagues are tangled in some sort of business with him.”

“Not anymore they aren’t,” Tabitha said idly. “Not now that Reginald has taken over the business. Whatever business or debts they

have are about to undergo quite some restructuring.”

“But . . . but . . . a murder!” Mrs. Oakley repeated, absolutely stunned. “How can you so casually speak of such things? Were you hurt?”

“No, we weren’t hurt,” Tabitha said patiently. “Actually, we were very involved, as I already said.”

“Who is this Reginald?” her father asked

suspiciously.

“Mr. Reginald Hatcher. He’s Tabitha’s suitor, and the one who helped her to solve Barton’s death,” Laura said, a teasing glint in her eye.

Perhaps predictably, Mrs. Oakley’s focus changed at once. What was *murder* when *love* was on the line?

“Suitor? Am I hearing this correctly, Tabby? You have a *suitor*?”

Tabitha shot Laura a look, while Laura looked back innocently. "You needn't seem so surprised, Mother, or I may get offended," Tabitha said eventually. "Yes. Reginald and I are courting, and have been for several weeks. He is . . . a very pleasant man. I fancy that I am quite in love with him, as I said before."

"*In love!*" her father exclaimed. "And we have not yet met the lad? This must be remedied at once. Sarah, when can we have him for dinner? Perhaps tomorrow?"

“Stop, stop,” Tabitha insisted. “Please. Reginald will come to London at the weekend to visit me. If you *must* meet him, perhaps you can do so then.”

“Saturday dinner it is, then, or perhaps a spot of luncheon instead,” Mrs. Oakley mused. “Oh, so exciting! I shall have two children married before I know it!”

“Are we really going to shift focus from the *death* we witnessed because I am

courting?” Tabitha asked incredulously.

“By all accounts, Barton was a cad anyway,” Mr. Oakley said dismissively. “Now, tell us all about Mr. Hatcher . . .”

The first printed copy of *Death in a Storm* arrived about two weeks later, bound in a beautiful cover. Tabitha almost burst into tears when she saw her name there in block letters on the front.

Inside, Cecilia had written a foreword as her editor, and Tabitha read it with growing wonder, still scarcely able to believe that all of this was real.

Dear Reader,

As I edited this work for my esteemed colleague, Ms. Oakley, I found myself entranced by its quality. While the characters portrayed in this book are fictional, the scenarios and issues contained within it are most certainly not. Each character in this book has a motive to kill—and each has a sympathetic arc which causes us

to consider what right and wrong really mean.

I do not mean to justify death, of course. However, when I founded The Englishwoman's Review, I did so to give a voice to the silent in our Society—those shunned for one reason or another, usually through no fault of their own. In Death in a Storm, we see a fictionalized account of the same quiet suffering, but in a very different light.

I implore you, Reader, to consider this while you enjoy this novel. Ms. Oakley's way with words breathes life and soul into these characters in a way few others could, and it challenges some of our basic notions of law and morality.

I, for one, am extremely excited about publishing more work from this author, and should this book become the success I think it deserves, the Review office intends to open an arm just for the publication of novels.

Thank you for reading, and I wish you would experience as much enjoyment and excitement as I experienced while perusing and editing this work.

Yours,

C. Rumley, editor

When Tabitha finished reading, she had a

wide smile on her face. She turned the page and saw the first chapter—*her* first chapter—there in front of her.

Slowly, her fingers traced the words on the page. She'd done it. No matter the outcome, no matter how popular this book turned out to be, here it was in print—words she herself had written, typeset on paper forever.

Perhaps I will never be Miss Austen or Mrs. Shelley, but I have people who believe in me and

in my words. How could I ask for anything more than that?

And so, Tabitha headed into the room where her parents and sister were waiting. Laura and Mr. and Mrs. Oakley applauded as she walked in, and Tabitha couldn't help but grin.

“Go on, then,” Laura encouraged. “We’re waiting.”

Tabitha walked to the middle of the

room and flipped the book open to the first page of the story. She cleared her throat—and then she began to read out loud.

Chapter 28

Si Sine Liberis Decesserit

It wasn't easy to always find the good part of a given situation. Caroline learned, as she moved from job to job and household to household, that there was sometimes simply no bright side. But she got through it.

When a kind churchwoman offered to teach Alice, or when a visiting foreign lady temporarily hired Caroline to wait on her for a lot of money and very little work, Caroline knew that there was always still goodness in the world, for those who did their best.

Excerpt from *A Daughter of Eve* by T. Oakley

(1820), p. 62

Reginald had been so busy over the past few weeks and months rebuilding Hatcher and Roberts from the ground up that he had gotten somewhat behind on his personal mail. When he finally did return to it, he found fifty or so letters addressed to him, an overwhelming number of which were from local newspapers asking for interviews surrounding the Barton scandal.

Initially, he had refused. He had thought that they wanted comments only to spin a

story about the bereaved—or plotting—
business partner left behind. However, he soon
realized that this wasn't the case. The
interviewers (or vultures, as he found himself
thinking of them) were after something else.
Someone, it seemed, had leaked Reginald's full
involvement with the case to the press.

*Claude. I knew that he could not simply
keep his mouth shut—while maintaining that he
was still the hero, of course.*

After talking it over with Daniel,

Reginald at last agreed to go to some of the interviews and give statements. At the very least, after the first few, these people would start to lose interest.

“Besides, it will look good for us, especially if we *do* make the shift into criminal law,” Daniel pointed out. “Who would you hire? Some rich pampered seventh son of a noble, or a solicitor who already found a murderer all on his own?”

“That’s *hardly* what happened, now is it?”

Reginald asked with a snort.

“No, but *they* don’t know that,” Daniel replied. “And frankly, they don’t care.”

He was right, and so Reginald allowed himself to be taken from place to place, giving interviews and carefully avoiding questions while he did.

Between the newspapers, the interviews that he himself was conducting with several of Barton’s debtors, and all of his work at the

firm, Reginald soon found himself quite exhausted. After a week or so of juggling all three, he flopped at his office desk and said, “How long must this go on?”

“Don’t be dramatic, Reg,” Daniel said.

“Look outside. The sun is shining, our business is our own. Surely you must have *some* good news.”

Reginald started. In all of it, he’d nearly forgotten the best part of all of this—well, except for Tabitha, of course.

Well, this is certain to put a smile on both of our faces.

“Actually, I do have some good news. For you,” Reginald said. He opened a drawer in his desk and pulled out a letter.

Daniel accepted it with a small frown on his face, and Reginald eagerly watched his friend as Daniel read the letter.

After he had finished reading, Daniel

looked thunderstruck. “My family’s land . . .”

“Yes. Officially, at last,” Reginald said, grinning. “The Crown wished to reclaim it along with the rest of Barton’s estate, so I contacted some of our colleagues and paid a few visits to the house of records. With some investigation and more than a little luck, we managed to find proof that your great-grandmother had, in fact, been the oldest sibling all along—and therefore the land had always legally belonged first to her and her husband, then your grandfather . . .”

“Then my father, and then me,” Daniel said in wonder. “Reg . . .”

“Don’t thank me,” Reginald said quickly. “Barton muddied the waters for too long. I’m simply putting things right.”

“I shall thank you if I ruddy well please,” Daniel replied. “You brilliant man. You can’t possibly know what this means to my family and to me.”

“It means a lot to me too, Danny,”

Reginald said gently. “You *are* family.”

“Oh, don’t get all soft on me,” Daniel replied with a grin, though he reached over the table and patted Reginald on the shoulder. “Thank you, my friend. My brother. Seriously, thank you.”

“You can make it up to me by fixing the Murphys’ paperwork,” Reginald replied, trying to keep things light. “I don’t know who their accountant is, but perhaps he should invest in

an abacus, since apparently modern counting methods are beyond him.”

Daniel laughed and gave him a mock salute. “Aye aye, Captain,” he said.

“No, no,” Reginald corrected him. “Aye aye, *partner*.”

They both grinned, and then they set to work.

When Reginald got home that night, a letter was waiting for him. To his surprise, when he turned over the envelope, Mr. Grisham's name and address were on the back.

Burning with curiosity, he broke the seal and headed over to the comfortable sofa in his drawing room. The housekeeper had kindly gotten a fire going, and it crackled merrily in the fireplace, giving him light and warmth while he read.

My dear Mr. Hatcher,

I am sure this letter finds you unexpectedly, but I hope that it finds you well. As is perhaps unsurprising to you, I have had great difficulty in finding the words with which to write this note—but I truly believed it imperative that I did so. After all, it is only thanks to the combined efforts of yourself and Miss Oakley that I do not find myself hanging by the neck as food for the birds.

I wished to thank you—both of you, really—for this and for many other things. I thought

you may be curious to know that we have told Scott the truth of his heritage, and that my son—my beloved son—has refuted any right to be recognized as Barton's spawn.

It seems that I have a lot still to learn about life, Mr. Hatcher, and your youthful vigor reminded me that, despite what they say, perhaps there is still room for an old dog to learn new tricks. Thanks to you, I understand that I have a lot to reconsider, and I would like to offer my sincerest apologies for any hurt I caused during my time as Mr. Barton's . . . well, now that I

know the truth, friend seems like too strong a word, wouldn't you say?

Please pass my apologies to Mr. Roberts, as well, and my best wishes for him and his lovely wife.

I hope that when we meet again in business, we may open a new page of our book and begin anew.

And thank you, once again.

Yours,

Basil Grisham

Once he had finished reading, Reginald found himself very thoughtful for some time. Eventually, he tucked the letter into his breast pocket, intending to put it away somewhere safe. He wasn't sure yet if he'd reply—but it certainly gave him hope, and some joy, that Mr. Grisham seemed willing to embrace the second chance that Barton's death had brought him.

“Perhaps,” he mused out loud. “At the end of the day, we all need a second chance.”

He thought of Daniel and Laura and their rekindled love. He thought of Lady Wells and her obsession with revenge, Mrs. Grisham and her foolish heart, the Paddingtons and their bizarre dynamics. He considered poor Alice, who had been through so much, and who had grabbed that second chance with both hands.

Yes. Everyone deserves to have one more

shot at doing things right. And Reginald, wherever he could, was determined to help them do it.

When he arrived at Daniel's home for their weekly Friday dinner a few days later, he could tell from the atmosphere that something new was about to happen. Laura hurried Reginald inside, sitting him at the table, and both Laura and Daniel flitted around like hummingbirds, apparently unable to sit still.

Eventually, once dinner was served, the Roberts settled down at the table. After a few moments of nervous silence, Reginald laughed. “All right, all right, I’ll ask,” he said. “What’s going on?”

“What do you mean?” Laura asked, convincing absolutely nobody.

“Well,” Reginald said. “This is the first time that I’ve seen you since you got back from staying with your parents in London, and

you and Daniel both seem jumpier than a flea in the height of summer. Is something wrong?”

“Wrong?” Daniel repeated. “No, my friend, nothing is *wrong*. In fact—”

“Danny,” Laura reprimanded lightly.

Reginald looked back and forth between them, trying to gauge what could possibly be happening. “I . . . don’t mean to pry. If this is a private matter, then by all means, tell me only

if and when you're ready."

"Come on, Lulu. You told Tabitha,"

Daniel pleaded. "He'll find out soon enough anyway. Please?"

'Lulu'? Is it possible that these two have only gotten more sickly sweet with one another in the few months since the party?

Laura smiled indulgently. "Oh, all right then. You can tell him."

Daniel's eyes lit up. "You're sure?"

Laura nodded.

Reginald smiled at them both, waiting for whatever it was. He wasn't too worried—they were both obviously thrilled—but . . .

"Well," Daniel said after a short pause.

"As it turns out, Laura and I are going to be parents."

Reginald blinked. "What?"

Daniel gave him a beam so bright it made the sun look dull. “You heard right. In a few months, I shall be a father to a child of my very own. Can you imagine!”

“Oh my—Danny, Laura, that’s fantastic!” Reginald exclaimed. “How long have you known?”

“A month or so,” Laura said. “Though I suspected before. The midwives say that everything is proceeding well and the baby

should arrive in around half a year or thereabouts.”

“My God!” Reginald said with a chuckle.

“And here I thought there was bad news. I’m thrilled to hear it, truly. My heartfelt congratulations.”

“Thanks, Reg. We’ll go for a drink to celebrate once it all becomes more public knowledge. Laura hasn’t told her parents yet, you see,” Daniel explained.

“May God seal my lips should I try to speak of it,” Reginald promised. “But this is wonderful news!”

And it was. Daniel—a father! It was hard to believe that he and Daniel had already gone from boys to men who were husbands and fathers.

You’re nobody’s husband, Reginald. Not yet.

As Daniel and Laura twittered on

excitedly about the baby, Reginald could not help but peruse that thought further. He was thrilled for his friends—of course he was—but a shiver of something very close to jealousy went through him too.

“I want that,” he realized, barely noticing that he was speaking out loud. “I want what you two have. I want to wake up every morning next to the woman I love, and I want to hold our baby in our arms. I want to be a husband, a father.”

“What’s stopping you?” Laura asked.

“You have already met our parents and they are over the moon to have met you. I am sure Father would eagerly agree to your marriage proposal to my sister.”

Reginald stared at her, mulling over the question. What was stopping him?

Absolutely nothing but my own fears.

“You’re right,” he said. “You’re right. It’s completely within my reach.”

Daniel and Laura exchanged pleased, knowing looks.

“Well,” Laura said. “I know that Tabitha is visiting our aunt until Tuesday, but next weekend I believe she is absolutely free. Perhaps you should pay her a visit?”

“And perhaps you should go to London this weekend anyway,” Daniel added innocently. “Only your mother and Tabitha are away, isn’t that right?”

“You know, I think you’re right!” Laura said, as if this was shocking. “Father is still at home. I wonder if Reginald might have any business with him . . .”

“All right, all right,” Reginald chuckled. “There’s no need for the pair of you to look so proud of yourselves.”

They began to eat, lightly chatting and laughing as they did. A little while into the meal, Laura said, “Oh! I almost forgot to ask.

Daniel, my love, didn't you have something you wanted to say to Reginald? About the baby, once he knew?"

"Oh, yes, of course," Daniel said. He turned to Reginald, wiping his face with a handkerchief before speaking. "Reg, when the baby is here . . . you'll be his godfather, won't you?"

"Or *her*," Laura reminded him pointedly.

Reginald stared at them, once again

stunned. “What?” he asked. “You mean me?”

“No, my other friend Reginald,” Daniel said dryly. “Of course we mean you, you dolt. Laura is going to ask Tabitha to be godmother, of course. God forbid anything bad should happen, but we can’t think of a better pair to raise our child if it did.”

Unexpectedly, Reginald felt a lump in his throat. “Danny. Laura. You have no idea how much this means to me.”

“We have some idea,” Laura teased. “So you’re saying yes?”

“Of course I’m saying yes,” he said. “I . . . of course I am.”

And just like that, Reginald’s family grew again. How long would it be now until it grew even further?

Chapter 29

Stare Decisis

When Alice was six, Caroline decided that the girl must learn how to dance. Caroline herself was not in the most savory employment at the time, but she would not allow her daughter to suffer just because of that. No matter what it took, Caroline would set her daughter up for the best life possible.

Excerpt from *A Daughter of Eve* (1820) by T.

Oakley, p. 141

Tabitha kept every letter exchanged between her and Alice after the younger girl

arrived in New York. Though it may seem strange to some, Tabitha felt almost responsible for the young maid, almost like an older sister. She looked through the letters now, taking down notes as she went, hoping to garner new information for her book about Alice's mother.

She had titled it *A Daughter of Eve*, based on the first letter she had received from Alice, just after the girl landed on American soil for the first time.

My dear Tabitha,

I am writing to let you—and Reginald—know that I have arrived safely. My new friend, Captain Marsh, has promised to escort me to Albany, where I shall begin my work in the house of the gentleman Reginald recommended forthwith.

I hope that you are well, and that your family is also. I wondered if you had any more time to consider my request that I made upon leaving? I know that I left you my mother's diaries and such, but I do not want to pressure you if it is not a project you want to undertake.

I believe that my mother's story should be told,

though. You may freely use all of our names, except for the gentleman in question, of course. There is no record of my birth and, thanks to Reginald's help, the world knows me as Alice Patterson now. There is nothing to be feared from telling the whole truth.

I remember when I was a child, I once asked my mother why all of the tales were about privileged folk. Why, I wanted to know, did only the well-off deserve stories? What is it that made them better than us?

"Nothing," my mother told me. "And do not ever let anyone tell you otherwise. One person may have everything, and the other may have nothing, but on the day we're born and the day we die, we're all just sons

and daughters of Adam and Eve.”

I think of that a lot. Now that she is gone, and she has finally had her justice, I hope you will assist me in helping people know that she was just as valuable as any high class lady—and just as worth a story.

Thank you once again for everything.

Yours,

Alice H. Patterson

Tabitha had known upon finishing that

letter that she had no choice but to write the story. She almost felt duty-bound, not just on behalf of Alice, but on behalf of the world, to display the tale of this brave woman who had everything taken from her and yet inspired her daughter to live.

She could not rush it though. *Death in a Storm* had taken her a matter of months, but to properly do justice to *A Daughter of Eve*, she saw the writing process taking a year, maybe more. She said as much in her reply letter to Alice, hoping that the woman would not be

offended.

The response arrived exactly three months to the day when Tabitha and Reginald had seen Alice off at the dock.

Dearest Tabitha,

I hope this letter finds you and yours well. Please rest assured, I want nothing more than for you to do my late mother's story justice. Whether it takes you two years or ten, I know that you are the only writer I could ever trust to capture her essence.

In answer to your query after my health, I am doing well. Captain Marsh visits often, and my new employer is very kind. These Americans speak with strange lilts to their voices, and the children of my new household seem particularly enthralled by the way I speak. Perhaps I shall teach them how to speak more properly.

I am very excited for you about the news of your upcoming aunthood! Please pass my best wishes to Mrs. Roberts.

Speaking of aunts, I received a letter just the other day from Catherine, my mother's sister—the very same housekeeper who runs Mr. G.'s home. It seems that

Reginald contacted her and told her the whole story, and now she wishes to get to know me better.

Can you imagine! I have a family again at last!

I strongly suggest that if you need any further background information about my mother, please contact my aunt. She remains employed with her employers, though she is currently on an indefinite leave of absence while they decide whether or not they will ever return to their country home.

As always, I cannot thank you enough for what you have done for me.

Yours in affection and in debt,

Alice H. Patterson

Tabitha realized what she had to do. She got the address from Reginald and, a few days later, headed out to the home of Mr. Scott Grisham and knocked on the door.

The housekeeper answered—the very same housekeeper that Tabitha had come here to see. Apparently, the Grishams had installed their servants here while they lived with their

son.

“Miss Oakley,” Catherine said in surprise.

“What in the world—is Mr. Grisham expecting you?”

“Not at all,” Tabitha admitted. “But I came to see you. Could we have a moment?”

After obtaining the younger Mr. Grisham’s permission—whose exact words

were, “Do as you like, Catherine; you know I find having live-in servants awkward enough” —Tabitha followed Catherine down into the kitchens.

Catherine found them a quiet corner away from prying ears, then, when Tabitha was sure they were alone, the older woman said, “I am glad you are here. Alice said you might come.”

Tabitha hesitated. “How—how much has Alice told you in her letters?” she asked.

“She must write in a way that cannot be intercepted, of course,” Catherine said. She lowered her voice and added, “But Mr. Barton’s death was no accidental suicide, was it?”

Tabitha shook her head.

“I thought so. And to think that girl worked so closely with me for years without me having any idea who she was!” Catherine exclaimed. “It’s enough to break a woman’s

heart. I could have helped her so much. I could have helped both of them.”

“That’s why I’m here,” Tabitha said gently. “You see, Alice has tasked me with a rather unusual request. She wishes for me to write about her—about Caroline, I mean. Your sister.”

Catherine looked shocked for a moment, and then her face relaxed into a smile. “We called her Cara, you know,” she said. “As a little girl, she was Cara the Character because

of how lively she was. We were the best of friends. When she left . . . we held a funeral and everything, you know. I truly thought that she was dead. I had no idea what Barton had done to her, or I might have committed a sin myself.”

Tabitha gave her a sympathetic smile. She tried to imagine what it would be like to just suddenly lose Laura one day. It felt very cold.

She took out her notebook. “If it’s all

right with you, I'd like to know everything you remember about her," Tabitha said. "Even the tiniest details. In this book, I want to do my best to capture a part of her to keep alive. Can you help me with that?"

Catherine wiped her eyes. She wasn't quite crying, but there was obvious moisture there. She nodded and said, "I can. I will. How much do you want to know?"

Tabitha looked up at this woman who'd lost her sister, who hadn't known she had a

niece until it was too late. This woman who had attended her own sister's funeral, not knowing that she was alive and suffering the whole time.

I can't imagine what she must feel. I can't conceive how much it must hurt. But I can do what little I might to make it right.

“Tell me everything,” she said softly.

Catherine began to speak.

And Tabitha began to write.

Chapter 30

Collatio Bonorum

When Caroline was still Cara, she and Catherine used to play house. Older sister Catherine would be Father, Cara would be Mother, and their cat, Lexington, would be Baby. After Alice was born, Caroline often thought fondly back on those times. It might have been silly, but it got her through the roughest parts—knowing that, no matter what, she had family.

Excerpt from *A Daughter of Eve* (1820), p. 72.

Reginald's stomach tightened and relaxed so often that he thought he might be sick. He

knew how ludicrous it was to be so nervous as he made the journey to Tabitha's home. After a total of five wonderful months together, everyone expected this. Reginald had no doubt in his mind that he loved her, and she loved him in return.

But when the day came to actually propose, he felt as nervous as a schoolboy trying to give a flower to a pretty girl.

Daniel had teased him a little that morning, but Reginald hadn't minded. Fending

off his friend's good-natured barbs had actually made him feel more relaxed than before. That feeling of relaxation, however, had not lasted the entire carriage ride.

He arrived at the townhouse and rapped on the door. A young maid answered, one he did not recognize—but she certainly seemed to recognize *him*.

“Oh! Mr. Hatcher!” the girl exclaimed. For some reason, she giggled. “I shall go and tell Mr. and Mrs. Oakley that you are here.

They wish to talk to you in the drawing room before you and Miss Tabitha go on your walk.”

So, Mr. Oakley was unable to keep the secret to himself after I sought his permission last week. I hope he hasn't already told Tabitha.

Reginald followed the maid into the drawing room, turning this over in his mind. It didn't *bother* him that his intent to propose was known by what felt like everyone—not particularly—but he did want it to be a surprise for Tabitha. He knew that he could

not simply propose to her as any man would propose to any woman, because, well, she was not *any* woman.

He'd planned it out in intricate detail. But first, before any of that, he had one more obstacle to face.

"Announcing Mr. Hatcher, sir, ma'am," the maid said, curtseying in the doorway to the drawing room.

"Oh, good. Send him in," Mrs. Oakley's

voice echoed out.

The maid turned and nodded to him, and Reginald walked inside. Mr. Oakley was on his feet, and Reginald headed directly toward the man to shake his hand.

“Good to see you, sir,” he said. He turned to a still seated Mrs. Oakley and smiled, bowing his head respectfully. “And you look lovely today, ma’am.”

“Oh! You flatter me!” Mrs. Oakley

protested, not actually looking very upset about that fact.

“Not at all,” Reginald replied. “In fact, it’s very clear to me from where Tabitha got her beauty.”

Mrs. Oakley giggled girlishly, and her husband gave a deep belly laugh. Mr. Oakley patted Reginald hard on the back and said, “Now, lad, you already have our permission. No need to keep harping on.”

Reginald smiled. “It can’t hurt,” he replied.

“Oh, I do like him,” Mrs. Oakley said fondly. “Tell me, Mr. Hatcher—is there any truth to the rumor that *Hatcher and Roberts* are restructuring into a criminal law firm?”

“I can’t confirm nor deny that just yet, ma’am,” Reginald said. “But I can tell you that I have restarted classes in criminal law.”

He enjoyed the impressed look on their

faces at that, but was saved from further inquiries by the appearance of Tabitha at the doorway.

“Reginald! I wasn’t expecting you for another half hour,” she said.

Reginald turned to face her. God above, she was beautiful, her inky black hair plaited down her back in an old-fashioned style and her blue dress and matching bonnet setting off her pale skin perfectly.

Is it any wonder that I love her? Who could do otherwise?

“I was wondering if you might want to come for a walk,” he said. “Your mother and father simply can’t spare a chaperone right now, so we won’t go too far. Perhaps to the little park on the corner, the one with the little pond?”

“That sounds delightful,” Tabitha agreed.

Reginald took a breath. It was time.

The park was only a fifteen-minute walk away, and now they sat on a bench next to the pond, watching as the ducks splashed and chased one another. A few swans swam at the far side, looking at the ducks as disdainfully as a king might look at a beggar.

“You know, swans quite remind me of Lady Wells,” Tabitha commented. “Don’t you think? They have the exact same haughty

expression.”

Reginald laughed. “Does that make us little ducks, then?” he asked with a grin.

“Shall I quack the rest of our conversation?”

“Oh, please do,” Tabitha replied, smirking. “I’d love to hear your best impression of a duck.”

They both chuckled at that, then settled back comfortably on the bench, just enjoying the silence for a few moments. When they

spoke again, it was about a completely different subject.

“I visited Catherine just the other day, you know. Grisham’s housekeeper,” Tabitha told him. “I learned ever so much about Alice’s mother. By all accounts, she was a wonderful woman. It’s so sad that things turned out the way they did for her.”

“You’re doing a good thing in writing her story,” Reginald assured her. “Alice will be very happy, and I am sure that Catherine will

take some comfort from it as well.”

Tabitha smiled. “I hope so.”

Reginald knew that now was the moment. His heart thudded in his chest as he reached for his satchel. “Speaking of books, the *Review* sent me a copy of the mass-produced version of *Death in a Storm*. It seems that it has become popular enough for a second print already.”

“I know!” Tabitha replied

enthusiastically. “I can barely believe it. I hadn’t dreamed of such success so quickly. I owe Cecilia so much.”

“You owe *yourself*,” Reginald replied.

“Your writing is what calls to people, after all.” He pulled out his new copy of the book.

“I was wondering,” he said, “if you could give me an author’s signature on the title page.”

Tabitha laughed. “Oh, Reginald, that’s so silly. I’m hardly as famous as all that.”

“Please,” he entreated. “For me.”

She rolled her eyes and shook her head.

“Well, all right then,” she said. “When we get back home, I shall write my name on the inside, if you insist.”

He placed the book into her hands. “Will you show me where?”

Tabitha gave him the oddest look, but she opened the front cover to the title page.

“Oh,” she said. “Something is already written

here.”

Reginald feigned surprise. “There is?”

“Yes!” she said. “See, here, look. It says,
‘Tabitha Oakley, will you . . .’”

She trailed off, her eyes going wide.

Reginald had slipped off the bench while she was reading and now knelt before her, a ring in his hands held out to her.

“Will you what?” Reginald asked

innocently.

Tabitha gasped. “It says, ‘will you marry me’,” she whispered.

Reginald smiled. “Well, my love? Will you?”

She threw herself forward, not seeming to care at all about the dirt of the ground or the impropriety of the embrace. They hugged tightly and she kissed him so sweetly that he almost wanted to cry.

A few moments later, they separated, tearful and laughing all at once. Reginald pulled himself to his feet then put down a hand to help her up, laughing even harder at the quacking of the startled ducks.

When they were on their feet, they embraced again, and then Reginald said, “So, will you?”

“Yes, you silly man. Yes, of course I will,” Tabitha wept. “Oh, you beast! To surprise me

so! Who knew about this?"

Reginald laughed, kissing her forehead.

"Everyone it seems, except you," he teased.

"You're sure you want to do this? You want to be Mrs. Hatcher?"

"I want nothing more," Tabitha said. She hesitated, and then added, "But I do have one request."

"Speak it," Reginald said immediately. "If it's within my power to give you, it is yours."

She paused then said, “Well . . . since *Death in a Storm* has already taken off, and it was written by T. Oakley, would you be *too* horrified if I was to continue to write under my maiden name?”

Reginald blinked, a little surprised, but then shrugged. “Why would I be upset?” he asked. “Writers have worked under stranger pseudonyms. Your career is your career as much as mine is mine, Tabitha. Whatever you need, I support you.”

Tabitha smiled so warmly that he could not help but kiss her again. When he pulled back, she touched his cheek affectionately. “I do love you, you know,” she told him. “I cannot believe that all of that chaos lead to such happiness, but I would not change a thing.”

“Nor would I,” Reginald agreed. “Nor would I.”

Everything was different now. Only a few

months before, Reginald had been clinging to his business by his fingertips, fighting against a corrupt partner and struggling to find time for life. Now, he had a new business partner in his closest friend, a godchild on the way, and he'd found the love of his life.

Not so bad for a few months of work.

He swept her hair back out of her face fondly. "Whatever did I do to deserve a woman like you?" he asked.

“Well,” she said thoughtfully. “I do think it was something to do with solving a murder.”

Reginald stared at her, taken aback for a moment before he started to laugh. “You’re morbid!” he exclaimed. “Goodness, we must think of another story to tell people at the wedding.”

Tabitha laughed. “Oh, yes? One where you’re the handsome warrior protecting a fair maiden from danger?”

“Perhaps a different story,” Reginald said. “You are the brave warrior journeying alongside me on an epic quest.”

She took his hand, chuckling. As they began to walk again, back to her house where there would no doubt already be celebrations laid out, Tabitha said, “I have an idea. How about instead of either of those, we take our time saving one another?”

“For the rest of our lives?” Reginald

asked, arching an eyebrow.

“That sounds good to me,” Tabitha said softly. “In fact, I can’t think of anything else I would like better. Reginald, this is the best possible end to our story.”

“The end? Oh, no, Tabitha, far from it,” he said. “You and I have a thousand stories yet to meet in our lives. This is only the beginning.”

Epilogue

Animus Manendi

Though life was tough, Caroline saw the positives too. There was Theodore, the young man who she wished had truly been Alice's father, the young man with whom she knew she'd one day be reunited. It didn't matter how long they were apart—love, Caroline knew, would always prevail.

Excerpt from *A Daughter of Eve* (1820) by T.

Oakley, p. 173.

Six months later

The day of the wedding arrived, and Tabitha was surprised—and pleased—to find that she wasn't nervous at all. It would be a simple affair, just family and close friends, and afterward they would go directly onto their honeymoon. In truth, she simply wanted it over with, not because she was nervous, but because she could not wait any longer to be married to her Reginald.

“Oh, I do hope that Joe and Laurie stay quiet for you during the ceremony,” Laura fretted as she helped Tabitha pin back her

hair. “Mother isn’t good at keeping them quiet, but I don’t have anyone else to keep an eye on them.”

Tabitha laughed. “The twins are my nephews, Lu. I *hardly* mind them making a little noise at my wedding.”

Laura gave a smile that Tabitha saw reflected in the mirror and which warmed her heart. “Oh, Tabby. How is it that you’re already getting married? Weren’t you six years old a moment ago?”

“Oh, don’t start that,” Tabitha mock-begged. “Please. It’s bad enough to have Mother all weepy without you, too.”

The two sisters giggled, continuing to banter as they prepared themselves, and then the music started in the church outside so suddenly that Tabitha felt she’d nearly jumped out of her skin.

It’s time!

“Come, then. You had best meet Father before he decides you’ve run away,” Laura teased. “I shall be right behind you, as a good matron of honor should be. Just like you were for me.”

“Don’t worry, Laura. I know you always have my back,” Tabitha replied.

Tabitha walked up the aisle with her arm through her father’s, barely able to believe

that this was happening. As she passed the audience, she saw a hundred familiar faces—there was her friend and editor Cecilia with her husband and baby Linus, there was Joanna Paddington, sitting right beside Scott Grisham and waving at her.

Behind Joanna were her parents, and Mrs. Paddington looked almost gentle as she nodded to Tabitha on the way past. Beside her, Mrs. Grisham sat quietly, hand-in-hand with her husband.

Another person getting a second chance.

Good.

There was Lady Wells, still haughty but nonetheless wearing a smile along with her fanciest hat for the occasion. In the front row was her mother, with one of Laura's twins in each arm as they slept.

Finally, Tabitha allowed herself to look up at the altar. Her heart almost stopped. She'd seen Reginald a thousand times before, but had he always been so glorious?

Beside him, she saw Daniel nudge him with his elbow, and grinned. Reginald was staring at her with the same awe that Tabitha herself felt, and she thought she even saw tears in his eyes.

I suppose it's the best man's duty to help the groom gather his emotions, too.

At last—at last! —she reached him. The music stopped and her father formally gave her away, placing her hand gently into

Reginald's.

When they were instructed, Reginald and Tabitha joined both their hands and faced one another. They said their vows after the priest, repeating them line for line. Tabitha barely noticed what they were saying.

Reginald said, "I have something to add, if I may."

The priest nodded for him to go ahead.

“Tabitha,” Reginald said. “I am the luckiest man in the world to be your husband. I pray that neither one of us ends up a star of your next book, however—at least not like the mysterious Mr. Blake.”

A wave of giggles and gasps rippled through the audience. Behind Reginald, Daniel snorted and Laura covered her mouth to keep in her laughter.

“Certainly not, Reginald,” Tabitha replied, remaining composed. “So long as you

are always home when you say you will be,
and never forget our anniversary.”

This caused more laughter around the
room, warmer this time. Even the priest was
smiling as he said, “Let us continue.”

The two of them finished their vows, and
then the priest said the words that they’d all
been waiting for.

“And now, by the grace of God and the
power given to me by the Anglican Church, I

pronounce you Mr. and Mrs. Reginald Hatcher,” he said, sounding very pleased. “If you wish, you may now kiss the—oh, well.”

Before he could even finish, the two of them were in one another’s arms, their lips pressed together. Tabitha’s head swam with happiness. At last, she knew that she and Reginald—her *husband*—would never be separated again.

As soon as the ceremony was over, they hurried out of the church and straight into the

waiting carriage. It would take them to the dock, where they would set sail that very evening for a honeymoon at sea.

And, if our voyage should allow us to check in on a certain young woman in New York, more the better.

As the carriage left, Reginald and Tabitha waved out the window until everyone was out of sight. Once they were on the open road, Tabitha rested her head on her husband's shoulder.

“Well, wife,” Reginald teased. “What shall we do now?”

“Isn’t it obvious, husband?” Tabitha replied. “The same thing that we always do.”

“Which is?” Reginald asked.

The carriage bumped along the road and Reginald’s arm was warm and comforting around her shoulder. If this was their chapter’s conclusion, then it was one with which she

was truly satisfied.

She loved him. He loved her. And now they would live happily ever after. Before they did, though, Tabitha knew they both had a lot more living to do.

“Why, Reginald,” she said. “We simply turn to the next page.”

The Extended Epilogue

I want to thank you with all my heart for reading my novel **“A Mystery to Bind their Hearts”!**

Would you like a sneak peek in Tabitha and Reginald’s future?

Click on the image or the link below to connect to a more personal level and as a **BONUS**, I will send you the Extended Epilogue of this Book!



Or Click [Here!](#)

If you liked the story, I would be honored if
you could post your review!

A Fiery Bluestocking for the Earl-Preview

Prologue

Pursuit and Flight

Cecilia turned the corner in the hallway, hoping that she would shake Bernard from her trail at last. Her forest green ball gown was interfering with her steps, stopping her from moving as quickly as she would like, and her fiery red hair made it much harder to blend into the shadows.

*That I should have to hide in my own home
in the first place!*

The thought riled her, but she did not turn back. Her stubborn side wanted her to stand her ground and wait there for Bernard to come to her. She'd teach *him* a lesson!

But no. No, she couldn't do that. Cecilia couldn't comprehend why, but her older sister, Penelope, adored Bernard. Indeed, tonight was supposed to be the day where the two would announce their engagement. Cecilia couldn't do anything to ruin that. She wouldn't.

*Now, if only someone would tell Bernard
that!*

“Cece,” Bernard’s voice crooned from not too far away. Cecilia tried her best not to shudder. She hated that nickname; she always had. “Cece, come out and play.”

Cecilia’s heart raced in her chest. How many times did she have to outright refuse this man before he would leave her alone? Was one sister not enough?

She heard footsteps nearby and, picking up her skirts, hurried off in another direction. The next section was a little-used part of the house—nobody —had even bothered lighting the candles for tonight—but Cecilia hoped and prayed that this was a good thing. After all, when he saw the lights were out, he'd surely get bored and leave her alone.

Cecilia hurried down a dark corridor, welcoming the enveloping darkness around her. She bent and slipped off her shoes—barefoot was quieter—and rushed onward,

barely able to see where she was going.

She reached a corner, and suddenly, her fear gave way to exhaustion. Leaning against the wall, she slid down into a sitting position, finally taking a moment to breathe. Surely Bernard would get bored now. Surely he'd return to Penelope's side. Cecilia didn't really want her sister to marry this man, but it was better than—

“There you are,” a voice said in triumph.

Cecilia's blood ran cold as a figure stepped into the corridor, a candle burning in his hand. He'd brought light of his own, and he was smiling at her. The shadows cast by the candle made him look horrifying, like some ghoul from a story.

For the first time, Cecilia felt truly scared.

"Bernard," she said, allowing her fear to bubble to the surface. Perhaps, if he thought her scared, he would lose interest. "Bernard,

please.”

“Cece,” he said in a singsong voice. He sounded sickeningly triumphant as he placed the candle on the floor and took the final few steps toward her. “Why did you run?”

“I’ve told you. I’m not interested in this. You have the love of a good woman, Bernard, you—” Cecilia started, but her voice was cut off as his hands were suddenly on her face, roughly pulling her close.

“Give me a kiss, then, and I’ll leave you alone,” he said.

She shoved him, causing him to stumble backward and release her. Cecilia hoped that a physical rejection would be enough to send him away, but when he looked up again, he was grinning.

“Let’s have some fun, Cece,” he said. He approached again, pinning her to the wall.

“No!” she yelled. “No, I will *not!*”

Hurried footsteps sounded nearby and suddenly there were ten or more people gawking down the corridor at Cecilia being held in Bernard's arms.

Bernard laughed, dropping his arms. "I told you this was a bad idea, Cecilia. They've caught us now," he said.

She heard them whispering, but she knew that no protest she could make would be heard. Why would it? She was only a woman.

Bernard was a gentleman, and if he claimed that she had led him on . . .

“Cecilia!” a heartbroken voice cried from the middle of the throng. “How could you?”

Cecilia froze. There stood Penelope, her dear sister, looking at Cecilia as though she was some horrible demon come to ruin everything.

“Penny, it’s not—”

“How could you do this to me?!”

Penelope shrieked. “Bernard told me that you had been trying to seduce him, and now I see it’s true!”

No!

“I’m sorry, Penelope,” Bernard said, sounding genuinely regretful. “She wouldn’t relent.”

“Penny—”

Penelope's glare was enough to silence Cecilia entirely. She stood there as her older sister released a torrent of insults, and her whole body felt limp. Something had broken, Cecilia knew—something she might never be able to repair again.

For the first time in the four months since she'd arrived at Aunt Sophie's house in the countryside a few miles from London, Cecilia received a letter from her family home. After

her stark refusal to marry that cad Bernard- as it would be the only way to salvage her reputation, or so her parents insisted—it seemed that Cecilia was as good as dead to them.

She sat at the kitchen table, her hands shaking as she read the letter. They hadn't replied to any of the letters she'd sent since she moved in with her spinster aunt. Was this, perhaps, a peace offering?

'Lady Cecilia', the letter started in

Penelope's precise handwriting. *'I would like to request you stop sending letters, as it is getting tiresome to burn them.'*

“Ah, so no forgiveness, I suppose,”

Cecilia said tiredly. Aunt Sophie, who was sitting next to her, patted her hand. Referring to her by title was new. Cecilia wondered how much further the distance would get.

“You don't need to read the rest,” Aunt Sophie said. “You know how stubborn that child can be. I—”

“No,” Cecilia said. “I’ll read it.”

There was no response from her parents in the letter, and neither had Penelope answered any of Cecilia’s requests to talk. Instead, the letter read formally, like a news report. It detailed that Penelope had met another man, a young earl from the Scottish border. The two were to be married within the month, and Cecilia was told in no uncertain terms that she was not welcome at the wedding.

Cecilia finished reading and placed the letter down on the table.

“Are you all right, my petal?” Aunt Sophie asked tentatively.

No. I’m not.

“I’m just fine,” she replied. She stood, taking the letter to the cheerfully burning kitchen hearth, and tossed it in. If that was how things were to be, then so be it.

Cecilia turned back to her aunt. “Aunt Sophie, will you promise me something?”

“Anything, love.”

Cecilia walked back to the table, ignoring the crackling of the letter burning behind her.

“If I ever declare that I am to marry, ensure I am truly in love. I will not make myself a slave to these false, predatory men.”

Aunt Sophie smiled a little sadly. “Don’t

give up, Cil. The world isn't as bleak as it seems.”

Cecilia didn't answer. She just looked down at her hands on the table, listening to the burning crackle behind her, determined not to cry.

Chapter 1

On the Hook

I've never met a man like Walford. Who would have thought that such a man existed in the world?

C. Morton, The Englishwoman's Review, vol. 1

Alexander Rumley, the Earl of Walford, was terrible at fishing. He found it utterly boring to stand there unmoving, holding a line while he waited for fish to bite. If he was truthful, even when he *did* catch a fish, he

despised it. He hated seeing the poor thing struggle, and usually ended up throwing it back.

Regardless, Alexander was there at the edge of his estate for his weekly fishing session. It was one of Michael's favorite pastimes, and Alexander did whatever he could to make his friend happy. Since they had become adults with estates to run, it had been harder and harder to spend time together. Their fishing sessions provided a guise, and for that Alexander was grateful.

Nearby, Alexander's old dog ran around joyfully snapping at the birds as though he was still a puppy. Whiskey was already eight years old, and he'd been with Alexander for two of those years. Alexander had found the Irish Setter abandoned after a hunting accident had blown off one of the poor thing's front legs. Whiskey moved around now as easily on three legs as any dog on four, and Alexander found his determination a real comfort. He smiled, remembering the uncertainty of those first few days and how

eager Whiskey had been ever since.

“You look thoughtful,” Michael said, breaking Alexander from his reverie. “Is everything quite all right?”

Alexander glanced at Michael. The two friends were a study in physical opposites. Michael was short where Alexander was tall, his eyes dark blue while Alexander’s were the light grey of the center of a thunderstorm, and his hair dark brown where Alexander’s was the yellow blond of fresh hay. “I’m always

thinking,” he said. “You know better than to ask about what. Lord, *I* don’t even know half the time.”

Michael smiled faintly. “That’s true. They tell me that *I’m* strange, but you, Alexander Rumley, are a man nobody will ever understand.”

“I don’t know why,” Alexander replied with a shrug. “I’m terribly simple.”

Michael actually laughed at that, and

Alexander felt a little thrill of victory. He and Michael had been friends since they were boys at Eton, where Michael had been somewhat shunned for his strange mannerisms and refusal to show interest in the same things as the other boys.

Alexander had liked him immediately, though. Alexander had *always* had a taste for oddities. He knew that much was expected of him, but even in his childhood he had found much of it very silly. That was why his friendship with Michael worked so well. In the

young baron, Alexander found a kindred spirit.

“Joss got into trouble again,” Michael said after a few moments.

Alexander grinned. Joss—Jocelyn Williams – was Michael’s twin sister and even more of an oddity than her brother. “Another would-be suitor?” he asked.

Michael chuckled and nodded. “Yes. Apparently, telling him that she was not

interested was actually a form of encouragement. No man is able to resist a woman who has sworn herself away from marriage, it seems. She made quite a scene and called him names I did not even know existed, right there in the middle of the ballroom.”

Alexander knew he should be appalled, but he found the image funny. Tiny little Joss with her daringly short hair and big blue eyes looked like she'd never be a threat, but Alexander could only thank God that *he* had

never been on the bad side of her sharp tongue.

“Good for her,” he replied. “I know that I shouldn’t say that, but it’s true. Any man who cannot take no for a solid answer deserves what he gets.”

Michael smiled a little at that and said, “Alexander, you are a rarity amongst men.”

Alexander rolled his eyes. “Come now,” he said. “I’m nothing special. I think it’s just

high time that we—men as a species, I mean—
started to recognize that women are, well,
people. Just as much as we are. If not more,
sometimes. We can be terrible boors.”

Michael snorted. “I don’t know how you
have managed to remain single with an
attitude like that, my friend. What woman
wouldn’t want to attach herself to such a
man?”

Alexander shrugged. “Most of them have
no interest in my attitude—just my

appearance and, more importantly, my estate. I tell you, Michael, you were right to swear off marriage and focus on your title.”

Michael adjusted his fishing line. “That’s just not true,” he said. “I mean, yes, it’s true for *me*, but you? No. You’re a romantic at heart, Alexander. In all honesty, I don’t understand how you’ve managed to reach the age of six and twenty without settling down with a wife.”

Oh, Michael. The world is so simple to you.

*How I wish I could see things in the strange way
that you do.*

Alexander paused, making a fuss of checking his fishing line for a few moments before he replied. “I . . . Michael, I *do* want to marry,” he admitted. “I want to love and be loved. But all of these women that flock to my side . . . I can’t be who they want of me, and none of them are what I need. Honestly, if Joss wasn’t more like a sister to me, I’d ask *her*. At least she can hold a conversation.”

“She’d bite your hand off if you tried,” Michael noted. “But I understand. So what *do* you want?”

“Love,” Alexander said immediately. One of the best things about Michael was that Alexander could speak as bluntly as he pleased and never fear being misunderstood. Michael’s strange nature actually made it so the Baron *preferred* Alexander’s blunt nature that got him into so much trouble with other gentlemen. “I want real love, Michael.”

“And what does that entail?” Michael asked.

Perhaps a woman who isn't silly and obsessed with status. A woman who wants to spend time with me for my conversation, not my deep pockets.

“Equality,” Alexander replied finally. “I want a wife who is my equal. I want to be able to hold a real conversation with her, and work by her side. I shan't rule over her, nor she over me. We shall be equal partners, in life, in love,

in business . . .”

Michael stared at him, but he didn't wear the skeptical look that so many other gentlemen would. Instead, he nodded slowly. “I think I understand,” he said. “So . . . will you attend the Season this year? Do you think you will find your equal there?”

Alexander shrugged. He liked the dances and the events, but he'd found the Season tiring for a number of years. “I'm not sure,” he admitted. “The types of people who attend

don't tend to overlap with grand scholarly ideals of justice and equality. I don't judge these women for simply wanting husbands and safety, but they aren't the type of women I'm likely to find my one true love amongst, are they?"

Michael pondered this for a moment. He was always slower when it came to giving romantic advice or commentary—perhaps because the idea was so alien to him. Yes, Alexander reflected, Michael was an odd thing.

I am so lucky to be his friend.

“Joss is attending,” he said slowly. “With Val and Kit and that new girl they’ve added to their group in the last few years. You haven’t met Cecilia yet, have you?”

Alexander shook his head. He knew Joss relatively well, but Valérie and Kit he only had a casual acquaintance with; he’d only met them in passing when their little group met at Michael’s home. Joss’s friends were all misfits,

and Alexander liked them well enough, but he'd never really had the opportunity to get to know them.

“Cecilia?” he asked. “The girl you mentioned before, the one living with Sophie Morton?”

“That’s right,” Michael confirmed with a nod. “I’ve only met her once or twice, but she’s . . . interesting. She and Val are especially close, I think. She has a perfectly terrible reputation, so she fits right in with the

rest of them.”

Alexander snorted at this. Yes, Joss’s friends were all strange. He thought about what he knew about them all, realizing that it was perhaps the perfect time to get to know them properly at last.

There was Joss herself, with her short hair and insistence on wearing trousers and smoking a pipe, whose sharp tongue would probably get her imprisoned at some point.

There was Kit Collins, the bastard son of a

merchant, who flaunted his heritage instead of hiding it or acting ashamed of it as was expected of him. Valérie Bourdain was French, with an English mother, and rumor had it she'd been dragged back to England due to an inappropriate romantic partnership. And of course, Michael himself, with his strange ways.

Yes. These are my kind of people. I should make time to finally get to know them.

“What is this Cecilia like?” he asked.

Michael shrugged. “Pretty, I suppose. She looks like fire and acts like it too.”

Alexander tried not to smile at his friend’s strange way of describing people. He imagined that meant that the girl had red hair and a temper to match—a type which Alexander was not ashamed to admit always intrigued him.

“She’s nice,” Michael concluded, somehow putting a heavy weight behind the

word. “She’s got dreams—she’s got them all working on some journal, you know, looking to publish about women and equality and all that sort of thing. I think you will like her.”

Alexander pondered this. Yes, she did sound like the kind of person he would like to get to know—very much so, in fact. “And they’re all attending the Season?” he asked.

“Kit has special dispensation from his brother and father this year, so yes,” Michael replied.

“I think,” Alexander said, “that I should very much like to meet this Cecilia.”

“Do you think she’s the one you’ll fall in love with, then?” Michael asked in his signature simplistic way. Alexander was blunt, but the way Michael saw the world was something else entirely.

Alexander chuckled and patted his friend on the back. “I can hardly say that,” he said. “But I must admit that I’m very, very curious

to meet her.”

A few hours later, Alexander said his farewells to Michael and returned to the main manor, realizing the sun was setting. He had a few letters to finish writing, and he wanted to check in with his father, as well. He passed Whiskey off to the butler who dutifully took the dog off for his bath while Alexander went in search of the previous earl.

Alexander knew just how lucky he was to have gained the Earldom without losing his father. Michael's father had died two years ago, and almost all of the other young noblemen that Alexander knew had only come into their titles after a tragic loss. But that was not the case with Alexander.

His father, Lord Harry Rumley, had simply declared one day that he was getting old and wished to step down. Alexander moved seamlessly into the role, enjoying the challenge that it brought.

Neither of Alexander's parents still lived in the manor, preferring their quiet house in the countryside, but the previous earl did like to visit from time to time. Alexander and his father were close, though the older man couldn't understand his son's blunt ways or progressive attitudes. Still, despite their differences, Alexander felt that he and his frail old father made a good team.

Alexander heard voices coming from the drawing room as he walked through the

hallway, and he frowned. Who would be here?

Apart from the servants and his father, the manor was empty. He hadn't heard of any visitors. And yet, there was a young woman's voice echoing out in that twittering way that proper ladies often used—it was supposed to be appealing, but Alexander found it off-putting—and saying his name, of all things.

What in the world?

Alexander approached the drawing room and entered. Inside sat his father, propped

comfortably on his armchair, and three guests.

Two were perhaps in their fifties, a woman with iron grey hair and a man with a stern jaw. The other was a much younger lady, maybe eighteen at a stretch, and she started when he entered.

“Father? I didn’t know we had guests,” Alexander said.

“Lord Walford!” the strange man said, getting to his feet. “You cannot know what an honor it is.”

Alexander glanced at his father, who was looking amused but saying nothing. “Thank you for saying so, but I’m afraid you have the advantage on me, sir. What brings you to my estate?”

“Of course, of course,” the man said.

“Forgive me. I am Paul Benson, the proprietor of Benson and Sons. This is my wife, Elizabeth, and our daughter, Amy. We’ve come to discuss your future together.”

Alexander blinked. “My . . . our...excuse me?”

“Miss Amy’s parents were just telling me the most romantic story,” said Alexander’s father. His body might be frail, but his mind was as active as ever—that much was obvious from the teasing light shining in his eyes.

“About how you stopped in the street the other day to cover Miss Amy with your umbrella during an unexpected rainstorm.”

Did I? Oh, yes, the girl with the bag of

bread. She was getting drenched—what else was I supposed to do?

“Yes,” Amy’s mother said in a dreamy, breathy voice. “Our Amy told us that His Lordship was so kind. He saw my daughter in distress and went right to her side without hesitation. They had such a wonderful conversation, too!”

“What did you speak of?” Alexander’s father asked Amy, ignoring Alexander’s covert glare.

Amy blushed. The woman—girl, really, she looked so young and uncertain—stammered awkwardly as she answered. “Oh, well, I told him all about my singing lessons and embroidery projects,” Amy replied. “I . . .”

“It’s wonderful indeed,” said Mr. Benson. “My wife and I knew that we needed to come at once to pass on our approval for this courtship to take place. We can’t tell you how happy we are to be here.”

Alexander raised his eyebrows.

“Courtship?” he asked. He turned to Amy, who would not meet his eyes. At least the young lady had the decency to look embarrassed.

“I’m sorry, but I think there may have been some wrongheaded assumptions made here . . .”

“Nonsense, nonsense,” said Amy’s mother, a woman with a thin face and shrewd eyes. “We know that our Amy is a little young, but we understand that you youths cannot help yourselves when you make a connection!

What—”

Alexander met his father’s eyes. His father looked back at him with an impassive expression, obviously waiting to see what Alexander would do.

He took a breath. “I pray you, Mrs. Benson, please stop for a few moments and allow me to be heard.”

Everyone in the room turned to face him.

Alexander ignored them, focusing on Amy. “Miss Benson, I’m glad that I was able to help you in your time of need the other day,” he said, trying to sound gentle. After all, from what he’d witnessed, none of this was the *girl’s* fault. “However, I feel that your parents may have misunderstood my intentions. You are a very lovely girl indeed, but I do not think we would be a good match in a courtship.”

Amy blushed and looked almost relieved, but her father turned beet red. “You think you’re too good for my daughter, do you?” the

merchant demanded. “You think you can use my daughter and throw her away? You noblemen are all the same type—”

“Excuse me, sir,” Alexander interrupted quietly. He felt his father’s warning glance—the old man didn’t want Alexander to sink into his characteristic bluntness—but it was too late. He was chillingly polite as he said, “Your daughter herself doesn’t seem to have much of an opinion on this matter. Do you *want* to marry me, Miss Benson?”

The girl's eyes widened. "I . . . I don't . . .
I'm not . . ."

Alexander nodded and turned back to Amy's parents. "If anyone is *using* your daughter, it is you. Allow the girl to live her life as she pleases, stop treating her like a piece of property to barter. Perhaps she won't grow to resent you or collapse into silliness like so many other young women."

The two older visitors gaped, but Amy gave Alexander a small, tentative smile.

“Well,” she said, finally speaking for herself. “I think that the Earl has made himself quite clear. Let’s leave, shall we, Mama? Father?”

“By all means,” Alexander’s father said jovially. “Stay for tea.”

The Bensons muttered excuses and left, Amy shooting one more thankful look at Alexander as the door closed behind her.

Once they were gone, Alexander turned to his father. “You enjoyed that far too much, old man.”

His father grinned, making him look much younger and less frail than usual. “Blunt as ever. But not incorrect. You’ll learn one day, Alex, that the whole point of having children is to take pleasure in their embarrassment.”

Alexander rolled his eyes but couldn’t keep back a laugh. He and his father had a

strange relationship to some, full of mockery, but real affection hid under every jibe. He folded his arms and said, “Well, I have some further entertainment for you, Father.”

“Oh?”

“Yes,” Alexander said. “I shall be attending the Season this year. Willingly.”

Alexander felt a little thrill of victory at the surprise on the old man’s face. Then his father chuckled and said, “Oh, son. Do pass

my condolences to whatever foolish,
simpering girls attempt to be your wife. And
even more so to their parents.”

Chapter 2

A Found Family

It seems to me that there is a lot in this world that goes entirely overlooked. A man who does not wish to marry, a woman who refuses motherhood – they are seen as aberrations. Perhaps it is time to give those anomalies a voice.

C. Morton, The Englishwoman's Review, vol. 1

Three years had passed since Cecilia's exile. In those three years, she had never once received a reply from her sister, and her

parents only asked after her health in the most formal of ways. Despite this, though, Cecilia had rarely felt so happy.

She had always gotten along well with her father's sister, Sophie Morton, and Sophie's live-in companion, Claire Montague. Claire's husband had twenty ago, and she had moved in with Sophie as a way for the two of them to help each other cope. They had lived together since before Cecilia could remember, and she had always thought of them both as her aunts.

Aunt Claire bustled around that afternoon, serving tea to Cecilia and her group of friends. “And how are our young misfits today?” she asked fondly. “Kit, did you ever get that letter through to your brother?”

“I did!” Kit said cheerfully. “He hated it and told me to grow up and stop living in a fantasy world, but Christopher was always a bit of a stick in the mud.”

Cecilia smiled. She almost felt sorry for

Christopher Collins, the trueborn, half-brother of her lackadaisical friend. He and Kit had made tentative efforts to bond in adulthood after a lifetime of Kit being shunned for his illegitimacy. Still, Kit had a way of getting under anyone's skin. He seemed to find it amusing.

“Well, Kit, that's because you're a bloody bull calf in a herd of cows,” Joss said dryly.

“Language!” Aunt Claire chided.

“Aunt Claire, how can you live as you do and still be so shocked by a lady swearing?” Cecilia asked, amused.

Aunt Sophie, who was sitting next to Cecilia, grinned. “Oh, your Aunt Claire is more of a traditionalist than you’d like to think. You should hear the earful I get if I try to skip church on a Sunday!”

Aunt Claire rolled her eyes. “Perhaps I just have a better understanding of what is and isn’t a sin, Sophie,” she said testily.

“Valérie, dear, would you like a lump of sugar?”

“*Non, merci,*” the fourth and final member of Cecilia’s little group said politely. “I do not understand how you Englishwomen can drink your tea saturated with these things. No wonder they say your teeth will fall out!”

“Perhaps you just don’t need it because you’re sweet enough already?” Joss suggested.

“No,” Cecilia teased. “The French just

appreciate being properly bitter, and our sugar would ruin it.”

Everybody laughed, Valérie loudest of all. Of the group, Cecilia had to admit that Valérie was probably her closest friend. The French woman was beautiful, with her sandy hair and large dark eyes, and Cecilia enjoyed her quick, biting wit. It was what bonded them together in the first place, and the whole reason that Valérie had introduced Cecilia to the others.

“So, the journal,” Cecilia said once the laughter had died down a little. “I really think, if Kit can help out with the financial side, we can pull this off. It will have to be aimed at the outsiders, like us—women, mostly, but also people like Kit, people with fewer advantages . . . people on the fringes of Society.”

“Yes,” Joss agreed. “Like, for example, women who have no interest in tying themselves to men forever. Marriage sounds like a horrible idea. You were smart to avoid

it, Sophie.”

Aunt Sophie laughed loudly, but Aunt Claire tutted again. “Now, marriage can be a wonderful thing,” Aunt Claire said. “I loved my husband very much. I don’t know where I would have been without him or without the companionship I had from Sophie afterward. The key is in finding someone you love.”

“Exactly,” Valérie said with a firm nod. “People should marry who they wish to, not some *poule mouillée* who happens to have good

money and the right parts at birth!”

An uncomfortable silence descended over the table. Valérie was perhaps the biggest misfit of them all. Her mother had dragged her back to England five years before when she had discovered that her daughter had entered into a scandalously public relationship with another woman.

And now that woman is married to some Frenchman, and Valérie is here alone. It seems dreadful that she should hurt so just because of

her differences.

Well, that was why this group was perfect for her. Joss refused to act like a lady, though she would be furious if anyone accused her of being boyish; Kit relished in the fact that he would never be a gentleman; Cecilia herself had been shunned by her family and most of Society, and even Cecilia's aunts were outside the norm by living together with no husbands.

The silence carried for a moment before

Joss said, “What’s a pull molly?”

Cecilia snorted. “A *poule mouillée*. A wet chicken,” she translated.

“It means, how you say, a pathetic man. A milksop, if you prefer,” Valérie explained dismissively. “As useless as a hen with her feathers drenched.”

“That’s a good one. Maybe we’ll name the journal that. *The Sodden Poultry*,” Kit said.

Cecilia playfully slapped at his arm, relieved that he was always ready with a joke to skillfully redirect the conversation. Because of his attitude, people thought that Kit was quite stupid, but Cecilia knew better. He was one of the shrewdest men she had ever met.

“We’ll give the journal a *proper* name, thank you very much,” she said, sticking out her tongue at him. “If we wish to be published, we must be taken seriously.”

“You’ll need another group of people if

that's what you want, Cil," Joss noted
ironically.

Valérie huffed. "*Mon coeur*. Do not tease
our dear Cil so. We have all agreed that this
idea is a good one, no? If it is to be a success,
we must take it seriously."

"If it's to be a success, we must have
money. Any money," Joss noted. "Mike might
help, but I don't want it tied too much to his
title. My brother's a good gentleman, and it's
bad enough already that he's seen supporting

me and my eccentricities.”

Aunt Sophie and Aunt Claire exchanged a look, and then Aunt Sophie said, “Well, if it’s eccentrics you need, we two are right here.”

Cecilia looked at them in surprise.

Aunt Claire smiled. “That’s right. Sophie and I, we have a good bit of money put away. I can’t think of anything better to invest it in than you young people and this project.”

“Aunt Claire, Aunt Sophie . . . that’s asking too much of you,” Cecilia half-protested, though the excitement bubbling up in her stomach told another tale.

“Nonsense,” Aunt Sophie said firmly. “You are my niece, and the rest of you children are family as well. Supporting you is what we should and will do.”

She calls us children as if I am not the youngest of us at two and twenty. The others are seven and twenty or more!

But Cecilia couldn't be offended. She actually—secretly—enjoyed how her aunts mothered her. And who could say no to the promise of financial support?

“Capital,” Kit said. “I’ll see what I can get from Christopher, as well.”

“I’ll ask Mike,” Joss said. “He’ll probably pass me something discreetly.”

“In that case,” Valérie said, “we should

head into town tomorrow and see if we can find a printer. We have enough articles written for a test run, no?”

“We do,” Cecilia confirmed. “Do you really think we can do this?”

“I do not see why not, *ma chérie*,” Valérie replied. “But first, I shall have another cup of tea. *Without* sugar, if you please.”

Aunt Claire poured Valérie some more tea, and slowly the conversation became more

relaxed. Joss began to tell them about a would-be suitor who had approached her a few days before at a ball for a cousin's birthday. She seemed very proud of the colorful insults she'd used, including some French ones she had picked up from Valérie. By the end of the story, even Cecilia was blushing.

“Good God, Joss. Remind me never to get on your bad side,” she told her friend with a laugh. “That poor man!”

“Indeed,” Kit agreed. “I would sooner tame a lion than attempt to court one of you modern women. You are truly terrifying creatures.”

Valérie rolled her eyes, looking irritated. “This is nonsense that you speak. Women are wonderful, yes? It is men, *especially* Englishmen, who are the problem. They are all weak. Like . . .”

“Wet chickens?” Joss asked with a smirk.

“*Oui, exactement.*”

“Oi!” Kit protested, his gentlemanly accent slipping and some of his lower-class mother’s tone coming out. “*I’m* a man.”

“Then my case is proven, is it not?”

Valérie said unapologetically.

More laughter followed, while Cecilia patted Kit on the arm. “Don’t worry,” she told him. “Not *every* man is like that. Sadly, though, you are like a brother to me, Kit, and

every *other* man I ever have met seems to strive so hard to give the wrong impression.”

Aunt Sophie’s expression darkened.

Cecilia felt a surge of love for her; the woman was the only one who knew all of the details of what had happened between Cecilia and her family after Bernard’s indiscretions three years before.

“That’s why I shall never marry one of them,” Joss said, shrugging. “Men are good for a kiss or two or to share a pint with, but no

more than that.”

“*Mon coeur*, do not kiss the men with whom you attend those horrible pubs,” Valérie said with a delicate shudder. “You do not know where they have been.”

Kit rolled his eyes at the pair before turning back to Cecilia. “And you? Will you ever marry, Cil?”

Cecilia shrugged. “I don’t know,” she confessed. “I suppose not. I will never marry

for any reason other than the deepest, romantic love. If there is no man who will make me feel that, then I want no part of them. I do not think it's my fate."

Aunt Claire shook her head. "So young to have resigned yourself to be alone forever," she said with a sigh. "Never mind. Here is what we're going to do. Why don't we all go to Sophie's townhouse for a month or two? That way, we can find your printer, and you can all have some age-appropriate fun at the ball. Perhaps you will discover that not

everyone outside of this little group is quite so awful.”

“Just the men,” Joss replied with a grin, though this time it was apparent that she was just trying to annoy Kit further.

“It’s a good idea,” Aunt Sophie said thoughtfully. “Cil hasn’t attended the Season at all since she got here. That’s three years of hobnobbing that the poor girl has missed out on.”

Cecilia felt all eyes on her and realized that somehow this had become her decision to make.

Do I want to return to Society? We're shunned by them for our bad reputations. We're quite comfortable by ourselves.

But . . . well, it *had* been a while since Cecilia had been to a good party. The formalities of Seasonal balls might be annoying, but the music and the food were usually divine. And besides, wouldn't it give

them something to write about?

Slowly, she nodded. “I think,” she said, “that it could be fun.”

Her declaration was met by a round of grins. Valérie gave her hand an affectionate squeeze then said, “We must go and find dresses together, *ma petite colombe*.”

Cecilia smiled. Valérie had stubbornly clung to her French terms of endearment since arriving in England. In fact, Cecilia suspected

that the reason Valérie's accent was so heavy and her grammar still flawed despite having an English mother was a subtle protest against leaving her home nation. Only Joss and Cecilia were regularly referred to with anything other than 'my friend.' While Joss was usually "my heart" or "my love," Cecilia's nicknames tended to be more inventive. Yesterday she had been a hummingbird. Today, it seemed, she was a little dove.

Though it makes me wish my own sister was half as close to me as this one who found me

discarded to the winds, I enjoy it.

Cecilia stopped that train of thought immediately. Now was no time for such maudlin thoughts. Instead, she grinned and said, “Dress shopping sounds like fun, actually. Let’s take London by storm.”

Joss made a face. “I’ll pass,” she said, indicating her trousered legs. “I don’t know how you can stand to wear those things.”

The banter around the table resumed,

and Cecilia leaned back, finding herself suddenly excited. The journal was going ahead, her friends were around her, and for the first time in three years, she would have fun at a party.

What could go wrong?

Chapter 3

A Well-Meaning Mother

Since coming to London, I have discovered that I know very little of England. I may be fluent in the words and phrases used by the people, but I fear there is a whole other under-language in Society which I will never fully grasp.

V. Bourdain, The Englishwoman's Review, vol. 1

The elder Lord Walford was back in his countryside home, with Alexander in tow. Usually, Alexander would have sent some

servants to keep his father company on the way there, but he had been quite pointedly reminded that it had been weeks since his last visit to his mother.

It wasn't that Alexander didn't love his mother. He did, as much as any child ever loved a parent. It was just that . . . while his father struggled to understand his ways, he still tried. There was a strong bond there. For Alexander and his mother, though, a barrier had sprung up some time in his adolescence and never entirely lowered.

She was significantly younger than Alexander's father, only in her early fifties while his father was already past sixty. Their marriage had been arranged over a business deal, but they had come to love each other quite profoundly in the decades that followed . . . in their own odd way. The two had nothing in common except a mutual fondness, it seemed, for embarrassing their only son.

As Alexander looked at his mother now, he saw a woman who was content with her

life—still young enough to enjoy what she loved but old enough to face life with a kind of maturity that one did not see in younger women.

It's such a shame, then, that she dedicates all of that energy to things that simply do not matter.

“ . . . and I told Magda, I told her, listen, these young girls do *not* know what they are talking about!” Alexander's mother declared.

“Didn't I tell her that, Harry?”

“You did, Eva,” Alexander’s father agreed placidly—which, in general, seemed to be the right approach to dealing with her.

Lady Walford seemed pleased by this response. “Did you know,” she went on, “that they’re talking of *commercializing* those machines? So many poor women will be out of work!”

“People still need to operate the sewing machines, Mother,” Alexander reminded her

gently.

“Hardly the point!” his mother sniffed.

“After all, in *my* day . . .”

“Have you taken your medicine today, Father?” Alexander asked pointedly.

The elder Lord Walford shot his son a long-suffering look, and Alexander smiled.

Consider this revenge for your stunt with that poor Benson girl yesterday, Father.

“Oh, Harry!” Lady Walford said immediately, her attention gone from sewing machines and turned to concerned fussing.

“You know that you must keep track of your medications! Have you been having heart trouble? Is your memory all right? Come, let me call the doctor, and—”

“Eva, dear, did Alex tell you yet that he shall be attending the Season this year?”

Alexander’s father asked with a beguiling smile.

Alexander cursed under his breath and then nodded, conceding the loss. Yes, his father was frail and sickly, and sometimes his memory wasn't the best, but a man would be hard-pressed to find someone cannier.

“The *Season!*” Lady Walford cried. Her excitement was almost physically tangible.

“Son! Have you decided to take a wife at last?”

“Mother,” Alexander said calmly, though

anxiety spiked up inside him at the direction that the conversation had taken. He *hated* speaking with his mother about marriage.

“I’ve told you before. I have no objection to marrying. I just want to find someone—”

“Yes, yes, someone you can *talk* to,” his mother tutted. “Honestly, Alexander, I would have thought you’d gotten over this youthful idealism by now. Look at how happy your father and I ended up.”

“I know,” Alexander said. “But you were

lucky. I want—”

Lady Walford shook her head. “Now, my little Alex, let me tell you. My friend Magda—Lady Anwhistle’s sister, you know—her niece is visiting for the Season, too. She’s a lovely little thing, five and twenty and unmarried through no fault of her own. You simply *must* seek her out.”

“You mean Duke Anwhistle’s daughter? Paulina?” Alexander asked.

“You know her!” his mother said.

“Wonderful! We won’t even have to engineer an introduction.”

Yes, I know her. Unfortunately.

It wasn’t that he thought Paulina Charleston a *lousy* person. She was just, well, vapid. Her only interest in life seemed to be finding a husband. While Alexander did not judge her for this – after all, as the youngest child and only daughter of a duke, her possible paths weren’t expansive—he *did* judge

her for her snooty attitude and lack of engaging conversation. Perhaps she was bitter because of the three betrothals that had fallen through, or maybe someone had told her that men preferred a woman with an empty head. Still, either way, Alexander did not spend time in her company if he could avoid it.

“Don’t you think she’d be a wonderful match?” Alexander’s mother pressed. “I know that her father is determined his daughter find a husband this Season before she falls to spinsterhood. You could do worse than the

daughter of a duke, Alexander, and an earl
would be a steady husband for the girl, who
—”

“Enough, Mother!” Alexander said,
failing to keep the exasperation from his voice.
“That’s enough! I am tired of you pushing
these women onto me every time I visit. I do
not *want* a wife who is after my money or
power. I’d rather marry a dockside worker
than a duke’s daughter if the former could
hold an actual conversation. Why can’t you
understand that?”

“*Alexander!*” his mother declared, scandalized. “That is *unseemly*! Didn’t we raise you better than that? Harry, speak with your son! I’m sure that my nerves cannot take any more of this sort of talk!”

“Father, I—”

“That’s enough,” Alexander’s father said. His tone was mild, but it was firm, too, and both Alexander and his mother fell quiet. For Alexander, it wasn’t fear but pure respect that

made him hold his tongue. “I cannot bear to listen to you two argue. Alexander, dance with the girl for your mother. Eva, stop pushing every silly bit in a skirt at him. He’ll marry when he’s ready.”

“Yes, Father,” Alexander replied.

“Yes, dear,” Lady Walford added.

“Alexander, you know that I only want what’s best for you, my precious son.”

“I know, Mother,” Alexander replied

while struggling to keep his eyes from rolling again. “I know.”

The conversation went on in a kind of strained politeness. At the end of it, Lady Walford extracted a promise that her son would seek out and dance with Paulina Charleston at least once.

When he finally left, Alexander found that he was looking forward to this week’s ball significantly less than he had been before.

Cecilia had lived on the outskirts of London for three years, and in that time, she'd almost forgotten how full of life the Town proper could be.

Had she really spent her life amongst townsfolk and busy streets until she'd moved in with her aunts? London felt like an entirely different world from the simple but lovely cottage she had come to know and adore.

For the moment, she was alone with her two aunts, wandering through the Town and taking in the sights of the evening. Valérie and Joss had disappeared somewhere, and Kit had gone to check in with his brother and inform him he was in the area. Tomorrow, they would scour the publishing houses and printers to find someone who would help them with the journal. Today, though, Cecilia would just allow herself to marvel.

It was a cold and wet day even though it was summer, and although the air was thick

with moisture, it did not rain. Instead, a dreary fog hung over the majestic buildings and stark architecture of Central London. One would have expected it to mar the landscape. Still, as Cecilia and her aunts turned a corner to see the majesty of the Thames, the weather only seemed to enhance it.

The mist hung over the water, separated from it by some invisible barrier. The Thames was polluted, of course—how could it not be in a city this size? —but surrounded by the fog, it looked ethereal, separated somehow

from the anchor of the physical world. The shadows of people and places barely visible through the mist, figures looming without faces, and buildings that seemed to disappear into the sky only added to the effect.

“A left here, and we’ll be back home,” Aunt Sophie said, taking her arm.

Cecilia blinked. She had not realized how entranced she had been by the sights before her. “Yes,” she said, allowing her aunt to guide her down a side street and away from

the strange magic of the river.

The townhouse which Aunt Sophie had inherited in her grandmother's will was not particularly large. It was surrounded on both sides by semi-detached sister houses. Though kept well, it only had three bedrooms on the inside, one of which was barely larger than a closet. This was Cecilia's room; Valérie and Joss would share the twin room where Cecilia and her sister had slept as children, and the aunts would take the other large bedroom. Cecilia would have the small space all to

herself. As a young bachelor, Kit, of course, would not stay with them, but instead in his father's townhouse nearby.

Stepping inside the house was like plummeting back down to Earth after spending the evening in the mysterious, unknowable cityscape. The familiar touches of Cecilia's aunts were all around, from Aunt Sophie's numerous favored dog figurines to Aunt Claire's fascination with tapestries.

"It's not much," Aunt Claire said, taking

off her raincoat and boots as the three of them stood in the hallway, “but it’s home to us.”

“I think it’s lovely,” Cecilia told her truthfully. “Thank you for bringing me here. I know you don’t often come to London anymore.”

Aunt Sophie chuckled. “Well, two old church bells like us stopped being welcome in Society a long time ago,” she said. “So we left it, and London with it. I must admit, though, it’s nice to be back amongst civilization.”

“I’m not sure I would call London Society ‘civilization,’ Sophie,” Aunt Claire said archly. “Half of these people are more barbaric than any pirate.”

Cecilia laughed at that. She headed into the parlor, her aunts following behind her a moment later. It was filled with portraits, some on the walls, some on the mantel, a couple of miniature ones even propped on frames on the table. She smiled as she went around looking at them. There was one of

Aunt Sophie with Cecilia and Penelope when they were little girls; there was one of Aunt Claire beside her late husband; there was a third of Aunt Sophie and Aunt Claire together.

Cecilia smiled and moved on, then froze. The next portrait hit her in the gut like a physical punch.

It was a portrait of her parents. There stood her mother, young and bright and happy, and her father, looking proud. The painting had captured their essences perfectly,

and Cecilia almost felt as if they'd really be there in front of her if she only reached out and touched them.

Unexpectedly, Cecilia felt her eyes fill with tears. She loved her parents. She'd always been close to them as a child, especially to her father, who everyone said she looked exactly like. How had it come to this, where the only time she'd seen them in years was in a moment captured by a paintbrush nearly thirty years ago? How was it that the loving words she remembered from her

mother had turned to little but cold politeness in letters?

“Now, dearie, come away from there,” Aunt Sophie whispered in her ear. Cecilia felt an arm around her shoulders, and then she was being led away from the portrait to sit on the couch between the two older women.

“Don’t you look so upset. Francis will come around eventually.”

Aunt Claire tutted. “Your brother and his wife were always too stubborn for their own

good,” she said. “Do you remember when Adelaide wouldn’t acknowledge that Cecilia had read out loud for the first time while she was visiting us because she hadn’t witnessed it herself?”

“Really?” Cecilia asked, wiping her eyes.

“That’s just . . . I mean, that seems really silly.”

Aunt Sophie laughed. “Adelaide and Francis are a pair of silly people, and your sister, bless her heart, is just like them. You,

child, are different from the rest of your family. Rare.”

A misfit. Except with my friends.

“I just . . . I can’t imagine becoming a mother and then rejecting my own daughter,” Cecilia said, wiping her eyes. “It hurts from Father—of course it does—but somehow I expected Mother to understand. She had to be a young woman once too, after all.”

“How quickly we forget,” Aunt Claire

said sadly. “Yes, dear. I know it hurts, but I promise you, your parents—and your sister, as well—they’ll come around eventually. Believe it or not, they think they’re doing the right thing.”

“Because I embarrass them,” Cecilia mumbled.

“Because you *terrify* them,” Aunt Sophie corrected. “Francis and Adelaide, they’re the epitome of what a lady and a gentleman should be. Francis spent his whole life

knowing he would one day be the Earl of Frampton, and Adelaide always knew that she'd be some nobleman's wife. Penelope was born a likeness of her mother, bless her. That child was always proper to a fault. And then you, my dear Cil . . .”

“You were like Sophie all over again,” Aunt Claire finished. Something new. Something strange. You had all these opinions, all these attitudes. You thought, and you questioned, ever since you were very small. And then you threatened the fragile fabric of

reality they'd built around themselves, so they put you away somewhere until they knew how to deal with you, just as they did with your aunt all those years ago."

Aunt Sophie nodded. She looked a lot like Cecilia, though her hair was grey now at the temples. Cecilia suddenly had an image of a young Sophie, two and twenty and just *different* somehow. A young Sophie, refusing to marry. A young Sophie, being consigned to spinsterhood and hidden away in a countryside cottage. A young Sophie, who was

just like Cecilia.

“So they hid me away,” Cecilia said, trying to keep the bitterness out of her voice, “because I am trouble.”

“No, child,” Aunt Sophie replied. “They sent you to me because you are like one of those strange new gems from the outer colonies. You seem rough, and the effort is difficult, and they have no idea how to reach into your true value.”

“Which is why,” Aunt Claire added with a fond look at Aunt Sophie, “you shouldn’t give up on love and marriage just yet, Cecilia. There’s always someone out there who knows *exactly* what polish they need to chip away the roughness and make you shine.”

Both aunts hugged Cecilia then, and she hugged them back, praying with everything she had that their words were right. “Maybe one day,” she mumbled, “Mother and Father and Penelope will accept me fully.”

“Maybe,” Aunt Sophie agreed. “Maybe me, too. But that’s hardly important in the long run. I think what all of us need to focus more on is being happy within *ourselves*. Who you are doesn’t need to change, petal.”

The door sounded, and voices called in.

“Gil?” Joss called. “Are you in here?”

Her voice was immediately followed by Valérie’s. “Cecilia! *Ma choupinette!* Come and see what we have found!”

Cecilia straightened up and laughed, feeling lighter than she had in a long time. “Your little cabbage is in here, Val, Joss,” she replied. Her aunts beamed at her, and Cecilia took one last glance at the portrait of her parents.

Fitting in was difficult. Impossible, maybe. But Cecilia couldn’t worry about that now. Now, with her friends, her aunts, and a pen and some paper, she had a job to do.

She didn't fit into Society, but perhaps
with their journal, these misfits could change
what Society meant forever.

Chapter 4

That Kind of Nonsense

To be perfectly frank with you, the fuss and ball gowns never made sense to me. How is one expected to dance when one looks like they are wearing an overlarge umbrella on their hips? And why are only women expected to do this?

J. Williams, The Englishwoman's Review, vol. 1

“Absolutely not,” the man said, folding his arms. He was tall and thin, spindly to the point where Cecilia suspected that if he turned

sideways, he would disappear. “I don’t know what you were thinking in coming here. This is a reputable business.”

“And I’m a reputable gentleman,” Kit replied. “Come now, Mr. Herndon . . .”

Cecilia winced as Mr. Herndon’s thin face turned a unique purple color behind his hawk-like nose.

“A gentleman! And yet you bring this written nonsense to my establishment. You

think that I do not know who you are, boy?”

Herndon demanded. “When I received a letter from Christopher Collins, son of the great merchant, I expected *quality writing that our publishing house would gladly put our name on*, not his scheming bastard brother here to imitate him!”

“How dare you speak to him like that—”

Cecilia started, but Kit held up his hand.

“Calm down,” he said, still smiling at the man. “Your accusation is unfounded, sir. I *am*

Christopher Collins, son of the same. It is hardly my fault that both my mother and my father's wife decided that their boys *must* be named after their father. My brother Christopher finds it terribly inconvenient."

Cecilia bit her lip to keep in her laughter.

"But I do not deny my illegitimacy," Kit continued with a shrug. "Perhaps, then, you'd rather deal with Lady Cecilia here? She's as trueborn as they come, you know. Daughter of an earl."

“And she comes to my door peddling these ideas!” the man protested. “Isn’t your father ashamed? Of course, we don’t support this kind of nonsense.”

Kit’s smile immediately disappeared.

“This is how you talk to a lady?” he demanded. “And you call *me* ungentlemanly!”

Cecilia glared at Herndon, but she put her hand on Kit’s arm. “Come on,” she said, giving this printer up entirely. It was their

fifth failure of the day so far. “Joss and Val are waiting for us.”

Kit nodded, though he still had his eyes narrowed at the other man. “We wouldn’t want to print here anyway,” he said.

“Agreed,” Cecilia said. She tried to pretend that her stomach wasn’t churning as they walked out of the door.

Mrs. Mulaney's Irish Tearoom was one of Cecilia's favorite places in London. She'd first come there with her aunts fifteen years before, and she vividly remembered being fussed over by the already elderly proprietor. Madame Mulaney was around five and seventy now, but she was still running this old place with the help of her daughters.

Joss and Valérie were sitting at a corner table, and they waved as Kit and Cecilia approached. Cecilia smiled and sat, and before she had a chance to speak, Joss said, "Well,

thank God there's a *man* here now, Val. Maybe people will finally stop berating us for having the absolute gall to go outside while unmarried and female!"

"If we are relying on our dear Kit for morality, we have greater problems than we thought," Valérie noted. Like it did to Cecilia, the still-clammy weather had gotten to her, giving her a damp appearance despite there being no rain. "I do not suppose you two had any luck?"

Kit just grumbled. A young woman approached and smiled at them, and Cecilia gave their order.

When the server was gone, Joss said, “This is a nice place that you recommended, Cil, but I’ve been wondering something since I got here. What makes it an *Irish* teahouse?”

Cecilia grinned. “Only that Mrs. Mulaney and her late husband would be very angry if you mistook them as English,” she replied.

“Hmph. As would I,” Valérie replied. She took out a ribbon and tied her hair back as she spoke, pulling the dampened strands out of her face. “Present company and your aunts excepted, the English are most disagreeable.”

“I’d love to argue with you, but I can’t,” Kit grumbled. “Five printers. *Five*. And not a single one could even show us a lick of politeness, much less help!”

Cecilia thanked the young serving girl who approached with hot tea for her and Kit,

then turned back to her friends with a laugh.

“Oh, Kit, don’t look so sullen,” she said. “How baffling these Society people are! I am a lady, but because of a man's mistakes, I may as well be a street urchin. You are the son of an important merchant but shunned for the mistakes of your father. Joss’s brothers all have money and titles, but Lord forbid she should want to wear a pair of trousers! And Valérie, well . . .”

“I am a companion of Artemis and a friend to the great poet Sappho,” Valérie

replied dramatically. “In Classical times, I would have been art, but now I am an aberration!”

“Oh, Val, come off it,” Joss said, rolling her eyes. “Does everything have to be a theatrical performance with you?”

“But that’s the point, isn’t it?” Cecilia pressed. “Everything *is* a theatrical performance! These Society people, they don’t care about who we are or what we do. They only focus on how we’re . . .”

“Misfits?” Kit suggested with a raised eyebrow.

“Exactly,” Cecilia confirmed. “When really, *they* are the ones who don’t fit into how we are supposed to live. Can you imagine how much happier they would be if they spent less time worrying about what is and is not proper?”

When she finished, she was surprised to see all three of her friends staring at her. Then

Valérie smiled that dazzling smile and said,
“Oh, *mon petit rayon de soleil*, my little ray of
sunshine, how glad I am that we found you.
Such a way with words! Your journal will
change the world, *ma chérie*.”

Cecilia blushed, knowing that her cheeks
were flaming a color close to that of her hair.
“I don’t know about that. Let’s start smaller.
We can change our section of London, maybe.
And it’s not *my* journal, Valérie.”

“That’s right,” Joss said, patting Cecilia

on the back in a roughly affectionate way.

“This is our misfit project, after all.”

“If we can ever get someone to print for us,” Kit noted a little darkly.

Cecilia shook her head. She reached out and took Kit’s hand in hers, squeezing it in comfort. “Don’t say that,” she said, gently but firmly. “We *will* find someone to help us, even if we have to start a printing press of our own to do it.”

“Three women and a bastard starting a printing press and actually making sales?” Joss asked, raising an eyebrow. “Will fairies be running the printers, too? Unicorns delivering copies to people?”

“If anyone could tame a unicorn, it is our little hummingbird, *mon coeur*,” Valérie said, winking at Cecilia. “And we will help, of course.”

“We *will* be successful. I promise you,” Cecilia said, though, in all honesty, she was

terrified. How could she make a promise like this? How could she be sure?

*Yet, at the same time, I know one thing:
there is no way I will allow this project to fail.*

Kit nodded to himself then raised his cup as though it was a pint of beer. “To us, then.”

Cecilia picked up her teacup, and the other two did the same. “To us,” they echoed, and Cecilia allowed herself to feel hope.

“My dearest Alexander,” the letter started, and it left Alexander with a nervous stone in his stomach. The note had arrived just that morning, doused in a woman’s perfume with his name scrawled across the front so elaborately that he could barely read it.

I know that perhaps I should not be sending this letter as we are as of yet not engaged, but I simply had to talk with you. I cannot express my excitement enough about seeing you at the

Fairweathers' ball tomorrow evening. I shall be dressed in a pale blue if you wish to wear something which compliments my gown.

The real reason I am writing is that I overheard a conversation between my aunt and my mother. It seems that my aunt has heard from a 'mysterious friend' of hers that you have intentions toward me. Could this possibly be true?

Do not answer here! I shall see you tomorrow night, and I will daringly claim the first dance from you as I have heard you promised

your dear mother.

I hope this letter finds you well.

Yours in anticipation,

Lady Paulina Charleston

Alexander frowned at the letter, the hard feeling in his stomach only getting worse. What in the blazes had his mother said to her friend? What had Paulina overheard?

My dearest Alexander . . .

What a way to start the letter! Paulina was symptomatic of Society as a whole.

Alexander wasn't really one for being addressed formally in casual conversation, but for Paulina to be so startlingly informal in a letter—especially when she titled herself at the end—was scandalous even to him. If anyone had seen, they would make some awful assumptions about the nature of their relationship.

Perhaps that was her intention. To force intimacy by its very suggestion.

The thought made him terribly uncomfortable. When he danced with Paulina—and he *would* dance with her despite this, as he would not break a promise to his mother—Alexander would have to try to find a way to broach the topic.

He would have to be delicate about it. Alexander couldn't just accuse her of impropriety, not at the first ball of the Season.

He did not want to ruin her reputation, which was akin to ruining one's life for women, especially for someone like Paulina.

“What am I going to do about this, Whiskey?” he asked with an exasperated sigh.

The Irish Setter looked up from where he was curled up and napping on his favorite rug beside the fireplace. The look in his black eyes read very clearly to Alexander: *how should I know? I'm just a dog.*

Alexander stood from his desk and knelt by the dog, who instantly put his head in Alexander's lap. The Earl smiled, scratching the hound behind the ears. "Here you are, missing a limb, my friend, and I seem to have gained an extra one."

Whiskey panted as if in response. Alexander liked to imagine that his pet was comforting him rather than laughing at his predicament, but . . .

"How do I tell a girl she's got the wrong

idea without hurting her?” he mused. His petting must not have been good enough as Whiskey butted his hand, demanding more attention. Alexander looked at him. “Should I tell her that there’s no room in my heart because you wouldn’t allow it?”

Whiskey barked, then sniffed.

“No, you’re right,” Alexander agreed. “I can’t be alone forever with only my dog to talk to. I imagine you’ve got better things to be doing. But I *don’t* want to marry a woman I

can't even speak to. What a horrible life that would be for the pair of us."

Alexander looked at Whiskey, and the dog looked at Alexander. Finally, the man nodded. He could always find wisdom talking to his dog, even if Michael thought him faintly ridiculous for it.

"You're right," he said, ruffling Whiskey's head one more time. "I need to stop moping and at least try. I may not like Society mores, but I am *part* of them. Isn't that right, boy?"

Whiskey barked again. Alexander smiled.

“All right then. I suppose I should go and select an outfit for tomorrow night,” he said.

He stood up and walked to the door. Whiskey heaved himself onto his three feet and followed with that loping gait that Alexander always found endearing.

Alexander glanced back at the desk where Paulina’s letter still sat open.

He was still troubled, but it didn't matter. This was manageable. He just needed to act like the earl he was.

A thought hit him as he left the room and started to walk toward his chambers. It was a devilish one, and perhaps his resolve to behave properly had failed already. Still, he couldn't help but be amused.

"Say, Whiskey," he said to the dog, who was patiently following him. "I don't suppose you know what color *doesn't* match well with

pale blue evening gowns?”

Chapter 5

The Fairweather Ball

My lesser role in Society was decided long before I was born. Well, I wasn't the only one. None of us really get to decide anything by our actions, do we? It's enough to make a fellow wonder what the point of it all really is.

K. Collins, The Englishwoman's Review, vol. 1.

Lord and Lady Fairweather had owned the Renton Ballroom for as long as Alexander had been alive, and they took great joy in

hosting their parties here instead of at their home. Alexander suspected it was a way to show off, which was fair—it was an excellent place to spend an evening.

Unlike many ballrooms, it was not modeled in white marble after the traditional Grecian style. Instead, the floor was decorated in checkerboard tile, the ceilings high and sloping as though they had stepped back in time to seventeenth-century France.

Alexander found it quite amusing how

heavily fashions relied on history. He wondered if people would one day glamorize the high-waisted gowns and fitted tailcoats of the modern day in the same way that people now looked fondly back on medieval and Classic styles.

It's strange to think about everything in life as a part of a future person's history.

Though daunting, he was glad for the thought, as it at least managed to distract him. Alexander had just finished his promised

dance with Lady Paulina and found that it had not at all been as bad as he expected.

No, it had been considerably worse.

It wasn't that Paulina was a bad person, not really. Still, Alexander could not remember the last time he had been so dreadfully bored in another person's company. The dance had lasted only minutes, but he had felt as if he'd spent hours listening to her talk about the most inane subjects imaginable. Neither one of them had mentioned her letter.

Michael was there somewhere, but Alexander hadn't spotted him at all, which left him with one other option. He walked over to the refreshment table, aiming to get a drink, but he paused as he saw a woman he did not recognize.

Good God. She's beautiful.

It was his first thought, and though he cursed himself for the shallowness of it, that didn't stop him from staring. She was a tall

woman in a vibrant emerald dress with matching earrings, her hair a red so bright that it practically shone. When she glanced in his direction—though not at him—he saw that her eyes were as green as the jewels in her ears, and that her smile was even more enticing than her gentle curves.

Alexander could not remember the last time he was so struck by a woman. Perhaps that was why, against his better judgment, he cautiously approached. She was with a man that Alexander vaguely recognized. The two

were chatting animatedly and laughing freely, as if they were not at all bothered by the formality of the event around them.

The man with his curly brown hair and easy smile looked out of place. His outfit was fine enough, and he certainly looked the part, but it seemed he was attracting an aura of glares and judgment just by existing. He made a joke, and Alexander was suddenly sure of who he was witnessing.

That's Kit Collins, isn't it? Joss's friend? I

*went to school with his brother; they look
dreadfully alike.*

Alexander reached the pair, and they both turned to look at him. He opened his mouth to introduce himself—or reintroduce himself, in the case of Kit—but the words stuck in his throat.

“Well, well,” Kit said after a moment. “If it isn’t the Earl of Walford descended from on high to greet us lowly peons.”

Yes, that's Kit, all right.

“Mr. Collins,” Alexander greeted.

“Oh, don’t,” the man replied. “It’s Kit. Christopher, if you absolutely must, though my brother would be terribly confused. I barely qualify as a Collins anyway.”

Alexander smiled faintly. “As you say, Kit. Could you perhaps introduce me to your companion?”

Kit glanced at the woman, who was watching with an amused half-smirk on her face. “No, I don’t think I will,” he decided. “Cil, you can handle him yourself, right?”

“That’s hardly proper,” the woman said.

Kit shrugged and wandered off, leaving Alexander and the beautiful woman alone together. To his surprise and embarrassment, Alexander found his neck growing warm under the collar as she appraised him with her green eyes.

“Now look what you’ve done, my lord,” she said severely. She sounded as though she was scolding him, but her eyes were sparkling with mirth. “You’ve scared away my suitor.”

Alexander glanced over to where Kit had stopped a few feet away and was now blatantly flirting with some other woman. “If you’ll excuse me, my lady, I must express severe doubt that *he* is your suitor,” he said, indicating the scene. “Bastard or not, he would hardly be so brazen if he had a woman like

you on his arm.”

The redhead burst into laughter, unrefined but clear as a bell. “Clever. You’ve caught me with that silver tongue,” she said at last. What a lovely grin she wore! “But why do you refer to me as such? Do I not seem more of a ‘Miss’ to you?”

He smiled back, quickly caught up in her charm. “No, I know who you are, I think,” he replied. “You’re Jocelyn Williams’s friend, aren’t you? Lady Cecilia?”

“Ah, a detective!” Cecilia replied playfully. “Tell me, how did you work out such a thing?”

Alexander grinned. “There aren’t many women of your status who would be openly laughing in the middle of a ballroom with Kit Collins, for one thing,” he said. “Honestly, I’m surprised to see him here, though I had heard he was going to come. I thought that he would change his mind.”

“I insisted,” Cecilia replied, shrugging.

“He’s as fine an escort as any. It’s hardly his fault who his father chose to lay with all those years ago.”

Alexander was a little surprised by this. It was a thought he’d had often enough himself about illegitimacy in general. Still, he’d never heard it so openly expressed—especially not by a young lady.

“I suppose that Valerie Bourdain is also here?” he asked, glancing around the room.

“Valérie,” Cecilia corrected.

Alexander frowned. “That . . . is what I said. Valerie.”

She sighed. “No, not *Valerie*. Valérie.”

“We’re saying the same thing!” he protested.

“Ha!” she replied. “You tell that to Val’s face, see how well she takes it. But yes, she’s

here, and Joss as well. I think they're speaking with Joss's brother at the moment. What are you drinking?"

He blinked at the change of subject and then peeked at the cup in his hand. "Oh. It's lemon water, but it's been carbonated. See the bubbles? Adding flavor is a new thing, but I do find it quite delicious, if a little strange."

Cecilia tilted her head. "How odd. I know the Swiss gentleman has been selling bubbling water for thirty years or so, but I've never seen

such a thing here in England. May I try
some?”

He stared at her. On the one hand, all he wanted to do was hand this stunning woman his glass there and then. He was already enraptured by her. On the other hand, he didn't even know her. His parents, married all these years, would never dream of sharing a glass in public. For him to even consider...

His thoughts were interrupted by her laughter. “Oh, no, forgive me,” she said

through her chuckles. “Your expression! Do not worry, my lord. I do not mean to shame you in public. I am only teasing.”

Surprisingly, Alexander found himself not annoyed but charmed. “I admit,” he said. “I approached due to your beauty, but it seems that you have a wit to match.”

“Or perhaps your sense of humor simply is quite poor?” she suggested.

Alexander smiled. “Alexander Rumley,”

he told her. He held out the glass. “I haven’t actually sipped any yet, so it’s fine if you want it. I shall take another in a while.”

To his surprise, this tiny gesture made her blush. It highlighted the freckles that he previously hadn’t noticed on her cheeks.

Good God above, she’s adorable.

“Well . . . thank you, my lord,” she replied, her confident voice tripping for the first time. “I must admit to my curiosity. I’ve

never tried such a thing, and it seems almost as strange in this ballroom as I do.”

She accepted the glass and drank, her eyes widening in delighted surprise as the bubbles hit her tongue.

This woman was *dangerous*. Alexander could have looked at her all evening.

Regardless of her reputation, she—like the strange lemon water—was a perfect addition to the night. *Everyone else just hadn’t caught up yet*, Alexander thought.

“Just Alexander is fine,” he found himself saying. “May I call you Cecilia?”

“You may,” she replied, tentatively sipping again. “As payment for the drink.”

Alexander laughed. “And if I fetch you another drink later in the evening?”

Cecilia tutted. “My, it’s bold of you to assume you can hold my attention that long,” she told him. “Do you often make such rash

statements?”

Unperturbed, Alexander replied, “I may not be able to keep your attention, Cecilia, but you will undoubtedly have mine. You’ve had it from the moment I saw you and heard you laughing earlier, and you’ve sealed it with your quickness. I am afraid that, for the rest of the night, I shall persistently seek your company.”

Her hand fluttered to her breast in feigned surprise. “Well, then, Alexander, isn’t

it truly a lucky thing that you happen to be the only interesting person outside of my friends that I've met here all night?" She smiled. "I suppose I shall have to entertain your attentions, though with the proper requisite distance for ladies and gentlemen of our station, of course."

"Oh, of course," Alexander replied, unable to believe how delighted this conversation had made him feel. To his surprise, he felt a frisson of annoyance at Michael. How was it that this amazing woman

had been friends with Joss for three years already, and Michael had never introduced them?

That's entirely unfair, Alexander. Stop it.

He knew that, but he didn't care. All he really cared about was continuing this conversation and actually enjoying himself for the first time all night.

"Do you often simply approach ladies at these events?" Cecilia asked him, taking a

deeper drink of the lemon water, looking just as surprised as she had the first time. “It doesn’t seem very proper. You should have spoken to my Aunt Claire first. She is, after all, my chaperone.”

“Where is your aunt?” he asked, looking around.

Cecilia glanced around conspiratorially before leaning in to whisper. “Truthfully? She came through the door with the three of us and left shortly afterward. She has better

things to be doing than wasting time watching over young people dancing.”

Alexander couldn't deny his surprise, and he felt his eyebrows rise on his forehead as he said, “Is that right? Your family and friends don't seem to care much for propriety, do they?”

Cecilia shrugged. “Perhaps we will care for Society's whims when Society's whims care for us,” she replied. She studied him then, her eyes and expression suddenly serious. He felt

as if he was being examined by a surgeon, his every thought and feeling exposed. “Does that bother you, Alexander?”

“No,” Alexander said, though he hadn’t been aware of what he was going to say until he started speaking. “No, it doesn’t bother me. It’s strange, certainly, but . . . well, I don’t particularly care for it when people are mistreated through no sin of their own. As the years continue to pass, I’m becoming more and more aware that some of our more rigid traditions encourage just that.”

Cecilia's expression was nigh-inscrutable.

“Are . . . are you trying to impress me?” she asked. Was that a trace of uncertainty in her voice? “Is that what you truly believe?”

Alexander's answer was more substantial this time, more focused in his mind. “I won't deny that I wish to impress you, Cecilia,” he said. “But I promise that I'm answering candidly. I am my father's only son, and I have had heavy expectations placed on my shoulders since birth. In truth, I find them

limiting, even exhausting at times, and yet I know that I must thank God that I was not born a bastard, a woman, or in another country. If the pressures on *me* are so bad, I cannot imagine what *you* face.”

Cecilia continued to look at him very strangely for a few moments, and then she nodded. “I see. I appreciate your candor,” she told him. “It is . . . unusual from men of your rank. If it helps, I find it remarkably endearing that you would be so honest about something I know most people would rather not think

about at all.”

Alexander smiled, and Cecilia smiled back. The young earl did not know precisely what had happened, but he *felt* something change at that moment. Something—Alexander didn’t know what—had shifted within him irrevocably just from the short time he’d spoken to this woman. He had started on a path, a terrifying, glorious road to somewhere he didn’t know.

That’s absurd.

And yet, it felt right.

A moment of companionable silence passed between them. Cecilia finished her drink and handed the empty glass to one of the circulating waiters with a nod of thanks. The music that had been softly playing in the background ended, and the band began to set up for their next song.

Alexander didn't have a choice—or if he did, he didn't even want to consider the other

option. She had captured him with her beauty and kept him with her smile. Even if it was just for tonight, he *would* spend more time with Cecilia Morton. “May I have this dance, my lady?” he asked.

She looked genuinely surprised for a moment, but then she slipped her hand into his. “Well, when you ask like that, my lord, you absolutely may,” she replied with a smile.

A Message from Leah Conolly

Another story has reached its end. Here's to many more to come!

Thank you so much for reading my novel. You are the reason I am able to write the stories I love so I sincerely hope you liked it!

That being said, I can't wait to hear what you thought of my heroes and their romance so I would really appreciate it if you take the time to post a review, or even contact me via my website and email address! I will be very

happy to talk to you and receive your feedback because it will really help me improve as an author.

So, leave your review and help me write your next favorite page-turner!

Until next time, my wonderful reader!



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